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"THERE'S NEVER BEEN A BETTER TIME TO HEED THE CALL OF FFXIV"

Final Fantasy XIV is now ten years old and, joyously, it shows no signs of stopping any time soon. For *Final Fantasy* fans like myself (as well as a lot of the PC Gamer crew), we're living our questing, raiding, and chocobo-riding dreams.

And, with *FFXIV*'s epic new expansion, *Dawntrail*, dropping in summer 2024, PC gamers are about to be welcomed to explore an entire new world. With new lands, cities, jobs, dungeons, threats, gear, activities and more on offer, there's never been a better time to heed the call of *FFXIV*.

ROBERT JONES
Twitter
@rnicholasj

This month
Decided that retiring to the French countryside with *Final Fantasy XIII* heroine Lightning sounds pretty darn good. Chardonnay, Camembert, chocobos... what's not to like?

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
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The PC Gamer team

TYLER COLP
Twitter
@tylercolp

This month
Visited a haunted moon with a couple of buds. Got torn apart by space bees. Plus ça change.

LAUREN MORTON
Twitter
@ComradeCupcake_

This month
Watched video clips of Studio Ghibli food scenes on loop. Missed many, many deadlines.

SEAN MARTIN
Twitter
@RemainsToBeSean

This month
Set up an underground fight club for *Palworld* fans. The only rule of *Palworld* fight club is...

TED LITCHFIELD
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@DORFpatrol

This month
Mused on if he should augment himself with robot arms. Decided he's too hench already.

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BLAME JOEL

HELLDIVERS 2 is controlled by one mysterious man

H*elldivers 2*'s galactic war is much more than a mission selector. In a short time, players have become invested in the status of their favourite planets and reacted to gains and losses in a sector's liberation. The simulated conflict has become an unexpected focal point of the *Helldivers 2* experience.

Unexpected to players, that is. To developer Arrowhead Game Studios, the war is a product of planning and storytelling by a specific behind-the-scenes individual pulling the strings: what Arrowhead CEO Johan Pilestedt described to PC Gamer as *Helldivers 2*'s 'dungeon master'.

"We have an actual person with the job title of game master," Pilestedt told PC Gamer in an exclusive interview. His name is Joel, and he takes his job very seriously. "We have a lot of systems built into the game where the game master has a lot of control over the play experience. It's something that we're continuously evolving based on what's happening in the game," Pilestedt continued.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS HAS BEEN A MAJOR INSPIRATION FOR ARROWHEAD

Pilestedt says Dungeons & Dragons has been a major inspiration for Arrowhead. The studio aims to replicate the reactive storytelling of tabletop gaming in *Helldivers 2*. "It's the same format when you build that for millions of players, it's just that you can't get as personal with every individual. But you can still do the same twists and turns."

Those twists can be as granular as giving a specific player access to a special stratagem mid-mission to spice things up, but it also extends to

WHITE OUT

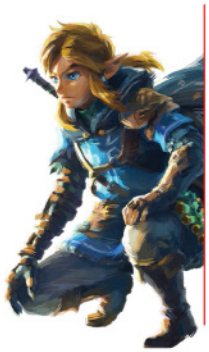
BETTER IN BEIGE

Noctua is ditching white fans. It's instead choosing to focus all its efforts on its next-gen 140mm fans currently nine years in the making. The company says it doesn't know if white will ever be back on the roadmap. No biggie, its beige and brown option is already perfect – don't @ me. ■ *JR*

BIG N-EWS

YUZU WON'T BELIEVE THIS

Nintendo launched a massive lawsuit against popular Switch emulator Yuzu. The devs behind the emulator capitulated, agreeing to pay "monetary relief in the sum of $2.4 million," cease development, hand over domains and even cancel development of 3DS emulator Citra. It's dead, Jim. ■ *RS*



RUNESCAPE, NOT EIGHT

I NEED TO SEE SOME ID

Jagex staff were briefly baffled when they woke up to find their Twitter (X) account straight-up banned. Turns out, Twitter's automated systems thought the account (which has over 300,000 followers) was in fact made by an eight-year-old child back in 2009. Just to clear things up: it wasn't. ■ *HR*

TOP: Players are valiantly defending against Joel's sly tricks.

ABOVE: Joel has played puppetmaster to *Helldivers 2*'s entire war so far.

larger narrativised events in the galactic war. We got our first taste of those a week after launch, when the offensive campaign against the Terminids was interrupted by Automaton invasions on the opposite end of the galaxy.

FUTURE UPDATES

Arrowhead says it has "predictions" about how the war will play out and has devised "set-pieces" that it thinks will be significant, but in true tabletop fashion, the story will change based on player behaviour. In fact, it already has. Joel has already had to grease the wheels for the enemy a few times when players proved a little too efficient at spreading liberty.

"There have been some sudden moments where maybe one planet was too easy or one was too hard and [Joel] had to get up in the middle of the night to give the Automatons a bit of reinforcement so the players don't take [the planet] too quickly," says Pilestedt.

As Arrowhead turns its attention to future updates, the community looks toward the next chapter of the war. With the Automaton invasion coming to a close, will Arrowhead direct helldivers back to the bugs? Considering the recent discovery of mechs and their production facilities, perhaps we'll soon be returning to the Terminid front with new hardware. ■

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

Share the love
Larian won big at the DICE Awards, and used its speech to speak out against layoffs.

Incognito mode
Steam has launched a 'Mark as Private' function, letting you hide your more, ahem, delicate games.

Space Quest
NASA has released a tabletop game that asks: what if a dragon stole the Hubble Space Telescope?

Low blow
Unionised YouTube workers were told they'd been laid off in the middle of a live-broadcast Austin City Council meeting.

Out of the game
EA let go of five percent of its workforce in February.

Cursed Tomb
Tomb Raider I-III Remastered on the Epic Store was mysteriously better than every other version, until Aspyr yanked it offline.

LOWS

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

People overestimate the importance of getting into things. "Oh, we ended up in the VIP lounge," you humblebrag to your colleague, as they silently regret asking what you did over the weekend. "Oh, we've bought a timeshare in the Maldives," you enthuse to your sister, her forced smile betraying her impatience with how irresponsible you're being with your money. "Oh, there was a complex series of steam vents The Spy used to reach the underground volcano base," The Spy tells The Spy's handler, who stares forward impassively, never moving, never blinking, always listening.

The Spy loves a good infiltration as much as the next person, but it's only half the story. What if, after you've arrived, you really, really want to leave? The VIP lounge is loud and tacky. The timeshare is old and dilapidated. The volcano is active and about to blow. Getting in is one thing, it's the exfiltration that really matters.

DOTTED LINE

For instance, imagine you were a game development studio recently acquired by a large holding company that had spent much of the last few years acquiring multiple smaller-tier developers and publishers. "We empower people and companies to unleash their full potential," the holding company declares, which you take to mean they will give you money in order to make the games you want to make. A great deal. You sign on the dotted line.

Now imagine that the holding company failed to secure a $2 billion funding deal – reported to be with Saudi Arabia's Savvy Games Group – and is now downsizing to an unprecedented degree. Things are looking bleak. What's your exit plan?

While you ponder that purely hypothetical question, let's check in with Embracer Group. The Spy would run down its recent history, but for some reason feels like The Spy would be repeating The Spy's self. If recent reports are to be believed, two of its studios are soon to be sold in the wake of continued turmoil and layoffs.

First up is Saber Interactive, which Bloomberg reports will be sold for $500 million to a cabal of private investors.

THE HOLDING COMPANY FAILED TO SECURE A $2 BILLION FUNDING DEAL

Saber is a full operating group in Embracer's org chart – one of its largest subsidiaries, acting as the parent company for numerous studios including Aspyr, New World Interactive, 4A Games and Tripwire. Upcoming games for the group include the *Knights of the Old Republic* remake – which Bloomberg confirms is still in development despite being "delayed indefinitely" in 2022 – and *Space Marine 2*, which was originally due out in November last year, but has been delayed into the second half of 2024.

Next, there's Gearbox, which Embracer acquired in 2021 for an eye-watering $1.3 billion. According to a Kotaku report, the publisher is now in the late stages of a sale being finalised, but as yet there are no solid details around who is looking to buy. Gearbox CEO Randy Pitchford responded to the rumour, telling Kotaku he was "delighted that what we might be up to is interesting enough to people that you want to make a story about us for your readers". To The Spy's eye, this is a pro move. Uncomfortable request from a journalist? Always have an exit plan. Spy out. ■

The Spy

THE SPY
The Spy always knows the fastest way out.

See the light

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PCG INVESTIGATES

BIG DECK ENERGY

How roguelike deckbuilder BALATRO uses poker, without really being poker

As a poker fan I'm always on the lookout for a new poker game. I'm especially keen to find games that use poker in interesting new ways, like RPG *We Slay Monsters* or roguelike *Poker Quest*, both of which use poker hands as their combat system. So, when poker-inspired roguelike deckbuilder *Balatro* came along I was eager to talk to its developer – not just about the game, but also what I assumed would be our shared love of poker.

"It's funny, I don't play poker at all," says LocalThunk, solo developer of *Balatro*. That is pretty funny, actually, because *Balatro* has, well, quite a lot of poker in it. You begin with a standard deck of 52 playing cards, you make poker hands like straights, flushes and full houses to score chips, you compete against bosses called blinds, and when you win a round you come away with cash.

But it wasn't a love of poker that led LocalThunk to create *Balatro*. "The game itself is really more based on Big Two," he says, "which uses poker hands, but you play them out of your hand of eight or 13 cards or something. And so it's based on that game, not poker, but I knew that poker would be a really good thematic tie-in that a lot of people could use as a launching point to understand some of the mechanics in this game.

"I could use the terminology in poker, I could use some of the visuals like blinds and antes and chips, and stuff like that, as a way to kind of make the whole thing feel cohesive, but I don't play poker. I don't really care very much about poker."

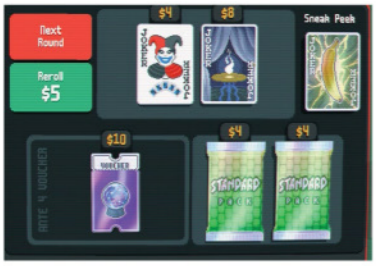
FAMILIAR GROUND

As someone who has played over 40 hours of *Balatro* over the past couple months – not the full game, I'm just talking about the free demo – I can attest to the effectiveness of using common playing cards and poker hands as a simple entry into the game. I know the cards, the suits, and the hands, so even on my first try I already understood the basics. I don't play a lot of other deckbuilders, so it usually takes me a while to come to grips with them, even friendly ones like *Slay the Spire*. But with *Balatro*, I immediately felt like I was on familiar ground.

"[That] was done very intentionally because that's something about other games... personally, it turns me off when I play a game and it uses a bunch of terminology like HP and poison damage and experience, those kinds of terms," LocalThunk says. "They're very gamer-y terms, and I don't play games a ton. So, those things to me, they feel like they're adding so many layers of complexity. When I made my game, I wanted to make it so there's no

Top dog

Big Two is a Cantonese card game also called Top Dog, Big Deuce, Deuces, President, or Chinese Poker, but it's more along the lines of Crazy Eights or Cheat. Unlike poker, two is the high card in Big Two (hence the name), not the ace. Straights are called snakes, flushes are called flowers, and a full house is called a gourd.



TOP LEFT: Make the right moves and you'll rack up a scorching score.

TOP: Shop for boosters and jokers between rounds to enhance your deck.

NO JOKE

A few of my favourite* Balatro *jokers

CREDIT CARD
Out of cash? Charge it to this joker if you don't mind going into debt.

HACK
Every 2, 3, 4, or 5 card you play gets counted twice to rack up extra points.

BLUEPRINT
Copies the joker it's next to. So that 2, 3, 4, and 5 will get counted again...

DNA
Play a single card in your first hand, and it'll give you back a copy of it to keep.

hit points, there's no damage, you're not attacking something. It's almost like solitaire."

Which isn't to say *Balatro* doesn't eventually get pretty complicated. What initially feels like poker quickly becomes something vastly different as you play. After each round you can spend your winnings in a card shop to enhance your standard deck into a bizarre, silly, and occasionally massively overpowered collection of cards. Booster packs add extra playing cards to your deck, tarot cards can morph your deck by letting you copy cards, destroy cards, or change a card's suit. You can buy multipliers to increase the scores of your favourite hands, or turn cards to glass (big points but they may shatter) or give them a seal (which helps your score if you discard them instead of playing them). Before long you may have a dozen aces in your deck, which make it easy to play four or five of a kind, or instead of the standard 13 hearts you may have double or even triple that amount, letting you become a flush machine.

WHAT FEELS LIKE POKER BECOMES SOMETHING VASTLY DIFFERENT

And then there are jokers to buy, the keystones of your *Balatro* strategy. Some add multipliers for every hand you play, some for specific hands, and some let you hold more cards at once or discard more often. Combining certain jokers can lead to high-scoring hands, and plenty of jokers just break the rules of poker altogether, like letting you form flushes and straights with four cards instead of five, or letting you photocopy cards in your hand. The further you get into *Balatro*, the stranger and more powerful your deck becomes, and you'll need that to defeat *Balatro*'s bosses which each have their own rules: limiting you to only one type of hand, dealing your cards face down and worse.

If you watch clips of people playing *Balatro*, you'll see just how gloriously broken decks can get. My personal best is scoring about 35,000 points in a single hand, but some players have created decks that score millions and even billions. "I'm very shocked when that happens because I'm not very good at this game," LocalThunk says. "I do get surprised when people are able to do stuff like that, because I can't."

As for *Balatro*'s origins, it came into existence the way I suspect a lot of games did over the past several years: wanting to connect with friends during Covid.

"I wanted to make an online version of [Big Two] for my friends that we could play during the pandemic," LocalThunk says. "And while I was working on it, I thought, I love the concept of *Luck Be a Landlord*, a roguelike that doesn't have an enemy, and you're just trying to get a really high score. So I thought, I bet I could make that with poker flavour with this engine that I've built." ■

Christopher Livingston

Secret Level

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF DEVELOPMENT

DIFFICULTY CURVES

Game designer **JOHN DENNIS** explains how to get difficulty balancing right

Before entering game development, John Dennis was "an art teacher who really didn't enjoy teaching!" as he puts it. A friend who was working at Team 17 encouraged him to apply for a game designer job there, which, after some hesitation, he did. "I was the first game designer they'd had."

Though at the beginning he wasn't sure precisely what a game designer did, he was clearly a quick learner. He stayed at Team 17 for 15 years, and had advanced to the level of head of design, leading a team of 14, by the time he left. After a few years at Activision, he moved on to working with New Star Games and Five Aces, where he's been for the past ten years.

The game he worked on for Activision was the mobile *CoD* game *Call of Duty: Strike Team*. Balancing difficulty for that involved a combination of things that may seem obvious, such as enemy health and accuracy, enemy effectiveness at taking cover and so on. As a racing game, *New Star GP* involves different variables, but the principle is the same.

"We knew we wanted different tyre types," says Dennis. "We knew we wanted fuel load, and for the fuel to affect the handling of the car. We knew we wanted dynamic weather in races. We knew we wanted component damage. The original concept for the career was that you'll start racing in the 1980s and race all the way up to the 2020s. Each decade of racing will be more difficult than the last one. The tracks will get longer and more technical, the opponents will get harder. And also we'll make the economy slightly tighter as well. The first decade will be very generous with the money, and it gets slightly tighter as we go."

TYRE YELLOW RIBBON

This is the highly effective method of introducing elements to learn at an early stage (eg tyre wear) which become more important as the game progresses.

On top of that, *New Star GP* also uses adaptive difficulty. "If you beat [AI opponents] by a lot, for example, they jump up their performance curve more than they would if the race is very, very tight. Certainly in the earlier decades of racing, they might step back a bit and go, 'We're probably a little too far ahead of the player at this point.'"

Dennis shows me graphs of AI performance across the game's decades, used to produce a literal difficulty curve. As each decade becomes more difficult, the adaptive element becomes less forgiving. During the Early Access period however, with only the first few decades available, some players wanted more of a challenge. A Pro difficulty was added, which makes things more difficult by dialling the adaptive element all the way down to produce AI opponents that want to win regardless of your performance.

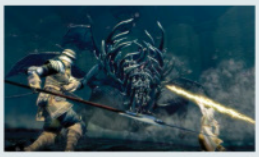
But how do developers know that they've gauged the difficulty correctly? For *New Star GP*, this involved feedback from volunteers prior to the Early Access release. Another method, which Dennis used during his time at Team 17, is usability testing. "We used to have a little room," he explains, "where we'd set up the game with a monitor and a mirror. Behind the test subjects we'd have a video camera, and we'd set them a bunch of tasks. We would leave the room at that point. And what we'd have on the video, because of the mirror, [was] the face of the person playing the game. So you'd see if they were angry, or frustrated, or laughing."

Testers would answer questions, but the footage could reveal something the respondent was unable or unwilling to say. Dennis gives the example of somebody who was clearly frustrated while trying out a game, but was reluctant to tell the developers that. "You get an honest and unfiltered sort of feedback that you wouldn't otherwise get." ■

Luke Kemp

HARD TO HARD

Four different approaches to difficulty



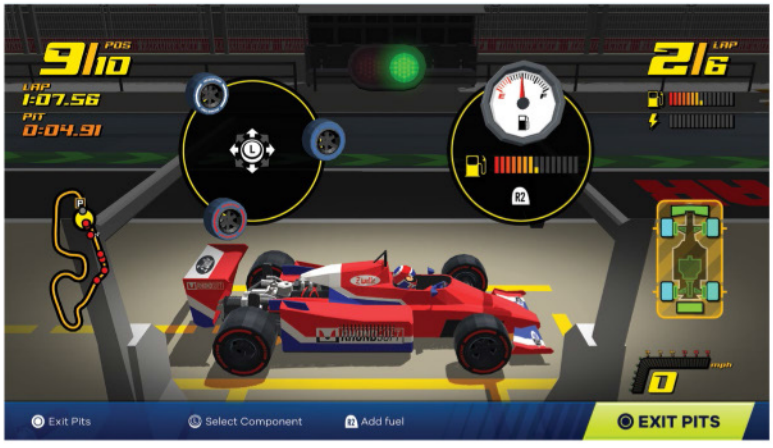
DARK SOULS
Featuring a difficulty cliff rather than a curve, the *Souls* series is about learning from mistakes.

SUPER MEAT BOY
Short levels mean losing little progress, and success is an adrenaline rush.

RESIDENT EVIL 4
You can choose your difficulty, but there's also an adaptive element affecting ammo drops.

POWERWASH SIMULATOR
Sometimes, it's hard to qualify the difficulty of a game. It can be more about goals that you set.

"THE TRACKS WILL GET LONGER AND MORE TECHNICAL, THE OPPONENTS WILL GET HARDER"



ABOVE: Cheery retro-style graphics, sure, but *New Star GP* can get as tough as you like.

FAR LEFT: You'll see a lot of the pits in *NSGP* – if you want to win...

LEFT: *Call of Duty: Strike Team*, which Dennis helped design, was an ambitious iOS game with first and third-person perspectives.

Incoming

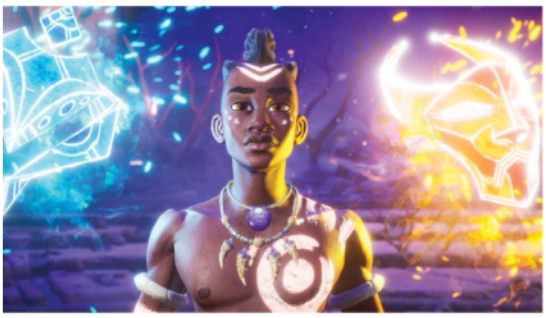
THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

EUROPA

RELEASE April 16, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Novadust Entertainment

A Studio Ghibli-inspired adventure-puzzler, PC gamers play as android Zee as he solves the mysteries of a fallen utopia. Looks promising.



TALES OF KENZERA: ZAU

RELEASE April 23, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Surgent Studios

A Bantu-inspired Metroidvania in which you must try to reclaim the spirit of your father in the beautiful but treacherous land of Kenzera.

HOMEWORLD 3

RELEASE May 13, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Blackbird Interactive

Another delay has seen the much-anticipated third game in the beloved sci-fi RTS to fall back to a mid-May release date. Keep the faith.

3 months

SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE II

RELEASE May 21, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Ninja Theory

The long-awaited sequel to the award-winning original *Hellblade*, Senna's Saga sees Senua return in a brutal journey of survival through Viking Iceland.

STAR WARS OUTLAWS

RELEASE 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Massive Entertainment

What's looking like the biggest *Star Wars* game of 2024, *Outlaws* see you play as rogue scoundrel Kay Vess in an open-world adventure set in the Outer Rim.

FROSTPUNK 2

RELEASE 2024 | **DEVELOPER** 11 bit studios

We were intrigued by the sequel to the hit society survival game, *Frostpunk*, at Gamescom. Difficult decisions and deep strategy await the player in this grim world.

6 months

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE Autumn 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, *Bloodlines 2* now rises from *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* dev The Chinese Room, and there's even a trailer.

STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

RELEASE September 5, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** GSC Game World

The long-delayed *STALKER 2* has slipped again to early September this year. But from what we've played so far the wait is going to be well worth it.

WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

RELEASE September 9, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Saber Interactive

Saber Interactive has been given a full extra year to make sure that Titus' return against the relentless Tyranid hordes will be a triumphant one.

12 months+

GTA VI

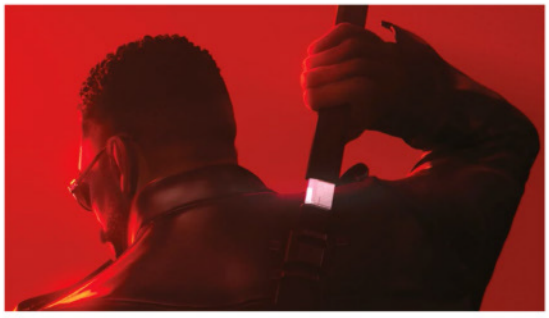
RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Rockstar Studios

Everything we're hearing right now points to the next *Grand Theft Auto* launching in 2025. But whether or not that includes PC is unknown.

MONSTER HUNTER WILDS

RELEASE 2025 | **DEVELOPER** Capcom

The famous virtual monster hunting series returns once more in 2025, promising the "pinnacle of excellence in hunting action gameplay".



BLADE

RELEASE Unknown | **DEVELOPER** Arkane Lyon

From the talented devs who brought PC gamers both *Prey* and the *Dishonored* series, Marvel's daywalker is set for a mature, singleplayer, third-person adventure game.

YOUR BEST PAL

If you've dived into the definitely-not-a-*Pokémon* game that is *Palworld*, then this top-rated mod looks like a must download. *The Pal Analyser*, which is the most popular mod on Nexus Mods' *Palworld* hub, displays details and stats about wild pals by just hovering your cursor over them. It's customisable, too. Grab it here: tinyurl.com/2s4m7phh

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
April 26	Slavic Magic	Hooded Horse	manorlords.com

MANOR LORDS

City building with epic battles in a game laying siege to Steam

Ah, the life of a medieval central-European peasant. Untroubled by the taste of Doritos or the mental anguish over whether to buy a Steam Deck or not, their only cares in life were where their pigs had got to and the constant threat of dying in a thousand imaginatively grisly ways.

No wonder they're such great fodder for videogames. *Manor Lords* contains many such peasants, doing wholesome things such as ploughing with oxen and planing trees down into timber, but also features spearmen, disease and the leading cause of death among the common people of the time: lords of the manor.

Despite its developer's inspiration from actual historical events, *Manor Lords* isn't set in any particular time period. And in contrast to a certain other game in this magazine's preview section this month, it doesn't look like you'll be able to take modern weapons with you into combat – although there's always hope for the revival of that cheat code for the original *Age of Empires* that brought lasers and nuclear missiles to the party. What this does mean is that the brutality of medieval weapons will be to the fore, as will laying siege to castles.

"Castles, sieges and siege engines are a fairly iconic part of the time period, and I have some grand plans for the implementation of these aspects," says Greg Styczeń, the one-man dev team behind the game. "I've previously showcased how some of the systems might work, and some of them were even in-game for testing at various points of development. I'm not yet sure how much of it will be available to play with at launch, and how much will be added during the Early Access period instead."

YOU'LL BE ABLE TO ZOOM RIGHT IN WHILE PLAYING IT AS A CITY BUILDER

Manor Lords is releasing into Steam Early Access, GOG and Game Pass' Game Preview in April, and currently stands at two million wish-listings on Valves' service. "When we first launched the announcement trailer in 2020, my girlfriend said she expected me to get 7,000 wishlists," says Styczeń. "I was more optimistic and said it would be more like 14,000 and that would be awesome. I did not expect the game to pick up so much interest and hit over two million."

PEACE OUT

This unexpected popularity has brought a level of scrutiny to the game that it's doing well to stand up to. The quality of its visuals, particularly in the motion-captured battle scenes and Quixel megascan photogrammetry used for its buildings, means it stands out. Despite the battle scenes being viewed as if from a *Total War* game, you'll be able to zoom right in while playing it as a city builder – and you don't even need to do any fighting.

PLAYED IT

"There's a non-combat mode in the game," Styczeń says, "and it's fully supported as a viable way to play for those who want to avoid the real-time combat mechanics. There are a few different win conditions that players can pursue, with or without combat. Players will be able to tweak the presence of bandits and the aggression of enemy lords right down to zero if they'd like, focusing instead on the challenges of supply chain management, harsh weather, and the rising demands of a growing population."

The game has recently seen its artwork updated as it nears launch, leading to Styczeń bringing in outside help. Despite this, it remains largely a one-man operation, "I still work on the game on my own, but I have enlisted the services of a company to help with QA, for example, and I have some freelancers for in-game models. I also have a core group of volunteers who've helped me with getting historical details as accurate as possible.

"The new key art you see, designed by my friend Wojtek, is the culmination of the many adjustments the community directly and indirectly helped bring about. In the early days of development, I kept things fairly loose, inspired by both France and England between the 11th and 15th centuries, and I've been fortunate to have a community that pointed out opportunities for better historical accuracy and focus across everything from architecture to armaments."

This has led to a consistent look for the game, which helps inform its sense of place and feeds back into new artwork and models that are produced. "Beyond art," says Styczeń, "the community has been an integral part of testing the game throughout development, and I've often turned to peoples' thoughts on various mechanics and experiments along the way to see what like-minded individuals hope for in a game like this."

MULEPOWERED

Other additions are constantly coming to the game too, with new features being patched in as quickly as Styczeń can work on them. "I've added so many new things, big and small," he says. "I recently prototyped pack mules to help move goods between regions, and I think they're very cute." There could be an engine update in the future as well. The game is being built in the Unreal Engine 4, but with version 5 producing some quality games, Styczeń is considering making the jump. "This is mostly due to improvements done to the engine that are unavailable for UE4. However, any major change at this stage can be very disruptive to development."

The game certainly looks like an ideal platform for mods, bringing the possibility of Vikings vs aliens or special forces vs dinosaurs, and Styczeń is considering it: "Modding is certainly doable, it's just a matter of what I should focus on at this time, I decided it can be worked on later after all the features are complete."

The game's subreddit is already seeing calls for mods to narrow things down to one particular historical period, but Styczeń has ensured this has remained vague: "Initially, I wasn't too obsessed with the historical side of things – I just wanted to make a fun game, and a 'generic medieval' setting was good enough for me," he says. "But in the earliest days of development, the game lacked that special 'something' that I was looking for, and it always seemed a bit fake. I had the great fortune of being surrounded by people who were much better informed than me on the subject matter, and that's when I started to notice the little things – tropes, weird armour proportions, timber framing that simply doesn't make sense. Before I knew it, I couldn't look at a medieval game the same way again.

"So I decided to ground myself in reality as much as possible," he continues. "A lot of my initial inspiration had already been taken from this specific time and region, so I decided to really double down and embrace it, allowing it to influence everything from architecture to fashion."

MORE CHANGES ARE PLANNED FOR THE GAME'S MAPS, OR MAP. THERE'S ONLY ONE

WAR FOR TERRITORY

More changes are planned for the game's maps, or rather map. There's only one, but it's quite large and allows seamless travel across it. "I've been establishing the sweet spot where players can establish themselves within their starting region, but are compelled to expand to adjacent regions for a variety of reasons, collecting and spending influence to do so," says Styczeń. But he's not stopping there: "I've been tweaking and adjusting map size and subdivision size throughout development. There's a whole cascade of implications, so at times I've been tempted to make the maps larger, and at times smaller."

Styczeń's influences for the game outside of the medieval period are pretty clear, with the trailers showing mounted knights and other types of troops, some of which will be patched in after release. "I played a lot of older RTS games when I was younger: *Stronghold: Crusader*, *Battle for Middle-earth*, *Knight and Merchants*, *Settlers*, and yeah even *Age of Empires*," says Styczeń. "These games inspired me to create an RTS of my own, which is partly how *Manor Lords* came to be."

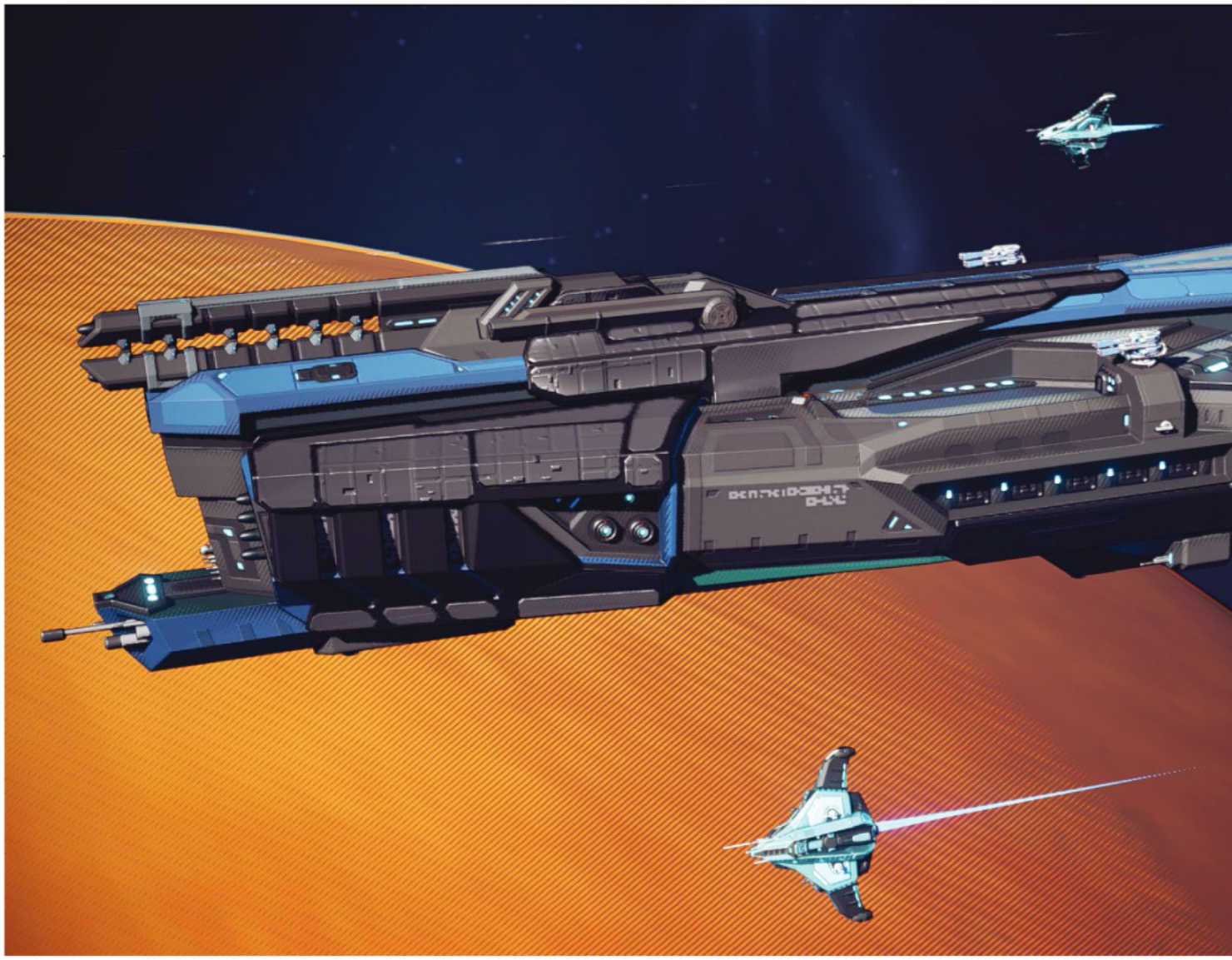
While a playable version of the game has yet to be released at the time of writing, we can glean much about *Manor Lords* from the trailers that have been released. It's good to see a medieval city builder get such a buzz behind it weeks before release, and the thought of sending all those peasants into battle... err... protecting those villagers from knights like a good lord should is an alluring one for a summer spent in the Middle Ages.

Ian Evenden

ABOVE: There's a hint of *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* about the medieval setting.

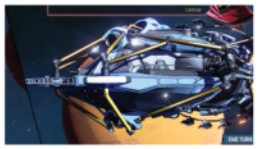
LEFT: Move the camera close to get stuck into real-time battles.

Breachway



ABOVE: Some opposing factions' ships can make you feel very small.

RIGHT: The ship status screen allows you to make modifications.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
March 22	Edgeflow Studio	Hooded Horse	breachwaygame.com

BREACHWAY

Slay the laser fire in this roguelike card-battler

The thing about roguelike card battlers is you wait around forever... no, that's not it. The thing about roguelike card-battlers is that they are legion, just keep coming, and absolutely will not stop. *Breachway* takes the genre, which is often rooted in fantasy, into space for a science-fiction twist on the *Slay the Spire* formula.

Sent out in a small ship to investigate some wreckage, armed with a laser cutter and a shield, you try to sneak through patrols by turning off your reactor and going dark. Of course this doesn't work, so the power gets turned back on and you start slashing your beam at any pirates foolish enough to approach.

In the wrecked spaceship is something valuable but forbidden, possession of which will bring the system authorities down on your head... but can also be sold for a lot of money. Naturally you take it, and attempt to escape with your prize by taking a route out of the system that brings you into pirate territory. A few fights later, from which you pick up credits, a missile rack, and extra cards, our intrepid crew is faced with a much larger ship against which it doesn't stand a chance, only to be saved by some friendlies.

This was just the prologue, but it brings with it most of the game's systems. You choose between various defence and attack cards that are based on the equipment you have on your ship. New modules come along as a result of combat or can be purchased, and your crew members add perks to combat that use up morale points you gain through your actions between fights.

THE TURN-BASED CARD BATTLING OFFERS VARIOUS SHIELDS AND ATTACKS

The turn-based card battling offers various shields and attacks both indiscriminate, such as the cutting laser slash or a flak cannon's shotgun burst, and targeted. Using an aimed attack allows you to disable weapons systems on your opponent, putting them out of action for as long as it takes repair drones to bring them back. There are three resources to stockpile, and cards will burn through them at different rates. Unused resources carry over to the next turn, as will cards, so discarding one you're sure you won't use allows you to free up space for the next turn's draw.

CRISS-CROSSED

As you traverse the map, which is criss-crossed with routes, some of which you can use to go back on yourself, you'll come across planets, waypoints, space stations and all the detritus an interstellar civilisation leaves behind. Alongside the pirates, there are other factions controlling this space, and your standing with each one makes a difference to the kind of encounters you'll have while in their volume.

PLAYED IT

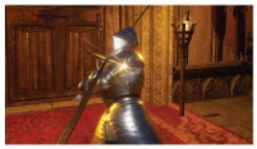
Planets are worth fighting by as they loom in the background, while shields provide an iridescent bubble around your ship. It's a Unity game, and has the modest graphics common to a card-battler, but the cel-shaded look suits it.

And just as different modules give you combat options, so too do your choices in diverting the power from your ship's reactor. This, along with the morale points, opens up deeper options and strategies than many other deckbuilders which, given the complex spaceships at your disposal, feels appropriate.

Much like *Slay the Spire* and *FTL*, a good run across the galaxy and a tailored build are required to stand a chance of defeating the boss at the end. *Breachway* offers a new spin on a crowded genre, with more depth than many examples, along with a coherent story and flowing battles. If the demo is anything to go on – and it should be – then we could have an important new entry to the deck.

Ian Evenden

The campaign map gives a clue to what you're facing.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC	Mithril Interactive	Mithril Interactive	dungeonborne.com

DUNGEONBORNE

Explore the dungeons of Steam Next Fest's biggest hit

D*ungeonborne* came out of nowhere to be the surprise hit of Steam Next Fest. A medieval fantasy extraction dungeon crawler that is effectively *Escape From Tarkov* but with swords and skeletons, it is difficult not to love. It also isn't difficult to figure out where its inspiration came from.

You'd easily be forgiven for thinking you've seen *Dungeonborne* in action before. Despite only breaking cover as Steam Next Fest kicked off, it will feel instantly familiar to anyone who is aware of *Dark and Darker*, the similar game that blew up last year only to be bogged down by legal battles. From the setting to visual style and of course, the main gameplay loop, almost everything in *Dungeonborne* feels like it has been taken straight out of *Dark and Darker* and dropped into a version that is on Steam with not all that much else to differentiate itself.

But, when the core idea of running into a spooky place, whacking some enemies with a big sword or lighting them up with magic, stealing their loot and running away, is so instantly enjoyable there isn't much that needs to be expanded on. This was proven by the fact that *Dungeonborne* topped the Steam Next Fest charts for the entire duration of the event, despite the barebones demo that was available with just a couple of maps and not all that much to do in terms of an overarching meta-game other than build your bank balance.

IT ISN'T UNCOMMON TO FIND EXACTLY THE SAME ITEM MULTIPLE TIMES

For the most part, games where you have to extract from the map in order to keep whatever you find and not lose whatever you took in are punishingly hard, and building that bank balance can take hours. But I found *Dungeonborne* to be the exact opposite – providing you keep your wits about you. With massive maps, a very generous timer on the battle royale-style closing circle of death, and not much in the way of storage space, it is very easy to get in, fill your pockets with decent loot and get out without ever seeing another player.

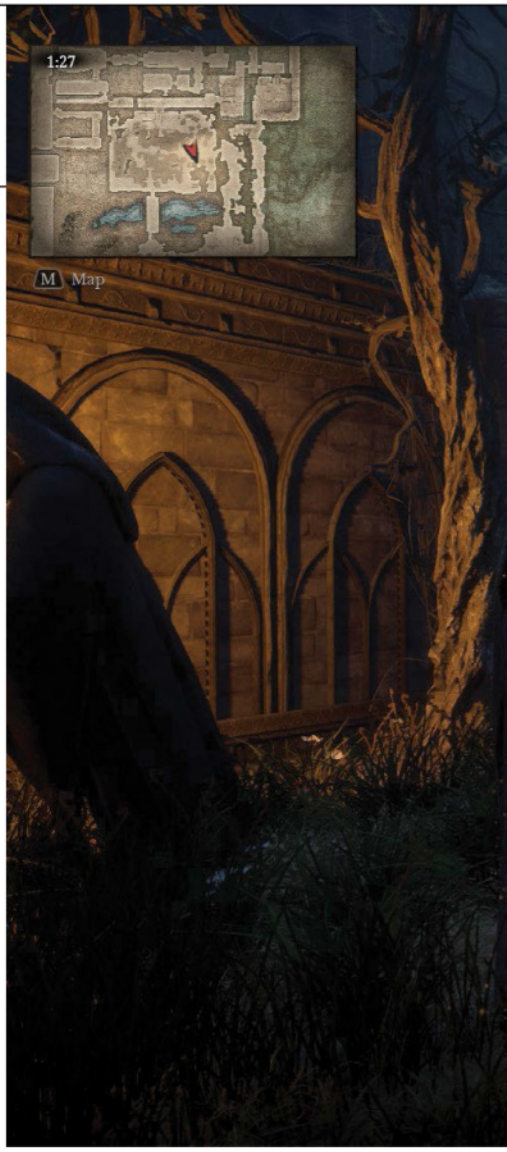
As someone who will happily stick to the outskirts of a *Tarkov* map so there is less chance of running into another player and losing my loot, it was a refreshing change at first. After just a couple of runs, it became obvious that a lot of players die early on to basic mobs, and with the big maps available in the beta – one of which was for solos and another for teams – you can dodge fights pretty easily. Within a couple of hours, I'd survived almost all of the time, and built up a very healthy bank balance by grabbing all the valuable trinkets I could find and selling them to the merchant once I was out.

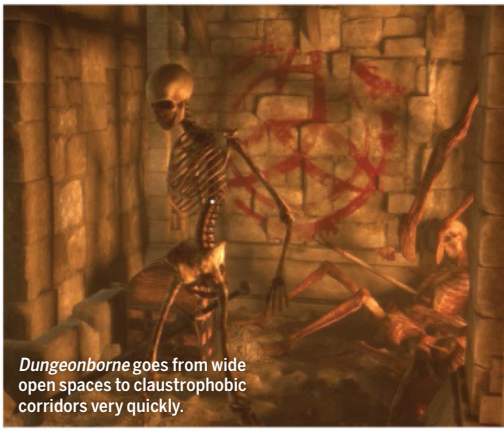
FIRST LOOK

GIVE ME RANDOMNESS

But this quickly grew tiresome. Once you start to learn the maps, or even one section of a map given it always seemed to spawn me in one of about four locations despite there being 16 players spawning in at different places, you realise everything is exactly the same during every run. The same enemies spawn in the same locations, and with very basic patrol patterns you can easily learn how to aggro just one of a group to make fights easier or just run past them to get to the next set of loot.

Loose loot around the world and not in chests always spawns in the same locations, and there is so much of it that even if there is some RNG involved it's difficult to tell because of the lack of variation between items. Loot in chests and found on dead AI monsters fares a little better in terms of offering exciting items, but it isn't uncommon to find exactly the same item multiple times. If decisions about what to drop or keep were more regular there would be a lot more thought that goes into your looting, but





Dungeonborne goes from wide open spaces to claustrophobic corridors very quickly.

ABOVE: The pyromancer was great fun, even this statue applauded my fire.

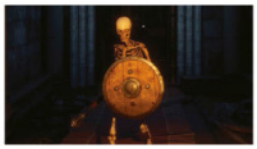
LEFT: Two death knights in a room. They might kiss.

Dungeonborne

RIGHT: Fireballs do a lot of damage to trees. Who knew?

BELOW: This was moments before that big sword bonked me on the head, ending my run.

My spooky skeleton skills were no match for this spooky skeleton



once you get upgrades to the base items the game gives you for free after you die, there is often little reason to change anything out as you will just find the same gear over and over again.

If there is one thing *Dungeonborne* needs above everything else, it's randomness. With randomised monster spawns you'll always be on your toes as to what could be around the next corner. Randomised loot spawns take away the ability to create the best path through a map to quickly get your loot and get out, and randomised gear stats would give you proper decisions to make on what gear you use.

FIGHTING IS FUN

Despite a lack of ranged combat given the medieval setting, and a need to balance magic with limited range to not make swords totally useless, fights against other players, while rare unless you go looking for them, actually feel quite varied. With each character having two abilities to use, which are class-specific, a lot of fights come down to how you use these skills rather than swinging your sword.

My first character, a fighter, was designed to be a tank making the most of heavy armour at the expense of speed. One skill tried to make up for this by offering a short burst of speed as you ran, while the other made me spin around holding my weapon out and slicing into anything stupid enough to get in the way. It was a seemingly simple combo but, in reality, it often left me exposed to characters that could attack from outside the range of my spin, and bashing them with my big sword was normally more effective.

My second character was much more fun. As a pyromancer, I had a big fireball I could charge up and blast enemies with, and an AoE fiery knockback to make sure enemies stayed out of sword-bashing range. In the smaller rooms that often feature items that are difficult to get past ,like massive tables or storage crates, I could often create a Scooby Doo-style chase where I ran around the table blasting fireballs in their face while they would follow me around rarely getting in range to attack. Being on the other end must have been annoying, but to me, it was great fun.

AS A PYROMANCER, I HAD A BIG FIREBALL I COULD CHARGE UP AND BLAST ENEMIES WITH

The last boy in my *Dungeonborne* stable was a death knight, who was basically a skeleton version of the fighter but way better. His version of the spin attack summoned dead souls in a ring around him to do damage, while his other ability sent out a deathly hand to grab a foe, or ally if you wanted, and bring them closer. It felt a little overpowered in the demo, as the soul ring dealt a lot of damage, but of the three this felt the most satisfying and like an actual combo you could use.

The *Dungeonborne* demo has its moments, especially in fights against other players, but it is clear it needs a lot more work before it can become great. There needs to be more of a reason, other than just making money, to go into battle and loot and that loot needs to feel more like a prize. Fights with players could do with being a bit more common, and there are some much-needed balance changes or ability reworks that should be glaringly obvious.

But all of this is seemingly easy to fix with time, and with no word on when *Dungeonborne* might return you'd hope its next iteration fairs slightly better. With just more content and a bit of fine-tuning *Dungeonborne* could be great, and there is a lot of potential here if things go well.

A BIG ELEPHANT

However, there is a massive elephant in the room that simply can't be ignored. *Dungeonborne* is effectively a *Dark and Darker* clone and its main advantage over it is that *Dungeonborne* is on Steam and *Dark and Darker* isn't. A recent ruling in the legal battle between Nexon and *Dark and Darker* developers Ironmace could start the wheels in motion for a return to Steam, and if that happens there would need to be some big changes made to *Dungeonborne* to make it stand out. Otherwise, you may as well just go play *Dark and Darker*, which feels like a more fleshed-out version of the same concept.

We could very easily go from having no games like this on Steam to having two by the time the next *Dungeonborne* test comes around, and it will be interesting to see if it can hit the same impressive player numbers again if that is the case. But if it remains the only option on Steam, then it will surely continue to prove popular, even if there is arguably a better version available elsewhere.

Mike Stubbs

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Out now (Early Access)	White Pig Games	Duality Games	whitepiggames.com

PLANE ACCIDENT

Liven up a walk in the woods by investigating a crash

First-person games tend to hand you a shotgun then send you off in search of someone to unload it into, so it's a refreshing change to play a game in which the most dangerous thing you'll be waving around is a cordless drill (and you'll need some batteries for that too).

Plane Accident is not a game about causing a jumbo jet to plummet from around 30,000ft, but instead casts you as an investigator, first on the scene following a crash and responsible for working out what happened using drones, email, and little flags that mark the location of debris.

The tutorial mission is entirely set in a warehouse, with all the parts and items you'll need in easy reach, but once you've sniffed out the reason this plane crashed (it looks like a bomb, which makes it sound much more action-packed than your trips to and from the office, courier truck and tool bench would otherwise be) you're sent out to the woods to tackle the real thing.

SPARSE WOODLAND

When you get there in your pickup truck, there's little to see beyond the sort of house in the woods some of us dream of and a stream with a little waterfall. It's a sparse woodland, the rocks kind of angular (in the warehouse tutorial, there were shafts of sunlight passing through the blinds that promised some lovely outdoor locations) and some textures decidedly low-res once you get too close to them. It's a Unity game and this is demo code, so there's time to sharpen it up.

THE REAL INVESTIGATION STARTS WHEN YOU'RE BACK AT YOUR HANGAR-LIKE OFFICE

Once the plane wreck is in sight, you can use a drone to scout the area out (it rises straight up from the back of your truck, taking no notice of the power lines above) and scan the area for debris. I find the propeller of the plane a long way from the fuselage, but also discover that someone has dumped a washing machine and an old Atari game console out there too. The plane's two seats have been thrown from the doors during the crash, though the bodies have been removed, and the engine is still on fire. I quickly put it out with a fire extinguisher, and get back to marking debris and taking photos before calling a contractor to clear away the wreck. The cleanup company, in a wry movie reference, is called Mr Wolf.

OFFICE JOB

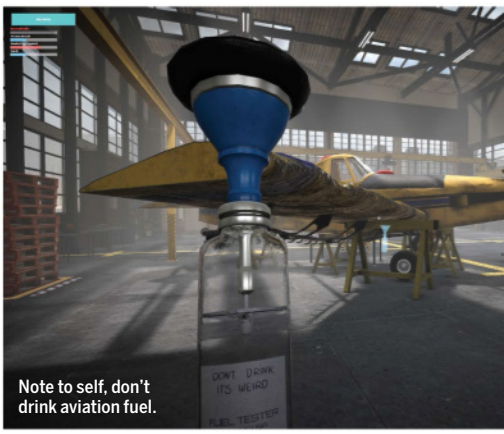
The real investigation starts when you're back at your hangar-like office, where you're required to answer questions such as whether the fuel gauge in the plane was working, could a farmer's penchant for rigging his crop sprayer aircraft with extra-large tanks have contributed to an emergency landing in a corn field, and why you can't walk into the office while holding a drill.

PLAYED IT

The strange forcefield that stops you from doing this is symptomatic of the game's desire that you do everything in what it considers the right order, and for those of us raised on *Hitman* and *Skyrim* it can be jarring to have your actions prescribed like this. You've always got a checklist in the top corner of the screen, and there's little room for improvisation.

Still, the investigations don't take long, and the scenarios we've seen, including a crop sprayer whose assistant got gallons and litres mixed up, have the potential to go in imaginative directions, though tend to be vague while you build up evidence, before giving you a key piece of information right at the end. Still, it's nice to get out in the woods and explore once in a while, and *Plane Accident* is the kind of interesting diversion that allows you to put your shotgun down for a bit.

Ian Evenden



Note to self, don't drink aviation fuel.

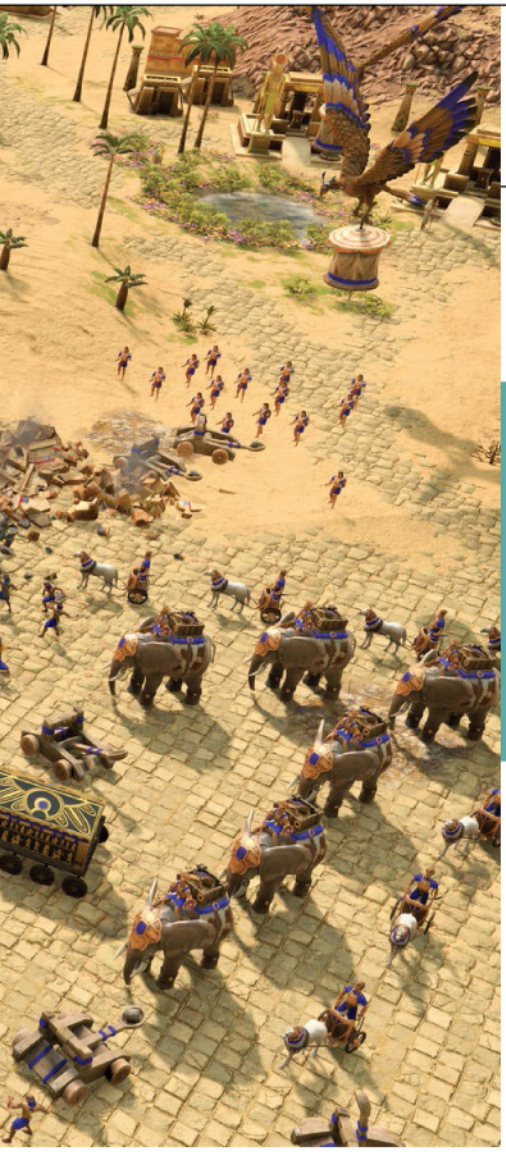
ABOVE: A lucky survivor of a plane crash.

LEFT: Your truck has excellent exhausts.

Age of Mythology: Retold

ABOVE: Unit counts have been ramped way up for *Retold*, so expect bigger battles.

RIGHT: Along with the classic mythical monster units, there are now rechargeable god powers, too.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2024	Forgotten Empires	Xbox Game Studios	tinyurl.com/ynz2zv36

AGE OF MYTHOLOGY: RETOLD

Revamped graphics, changes to unit numbers and more

The upcoming *Age of Mythology: Retold* has just shown off its signature mythological monsters in detail, including the terrible Medusas, the flying Pegasus scout, and the titan Cerberus, and I've got to say the monsters are dang good looking.

These visually punchy new models are part of the overall effort to make *Age of Mythology: Retold* a real upgrade from the original 2002 game, including changes to the models as you upgrade through the ages – though they come complete with a stack of classic sounds and twists on the old animations. The Medusa death sound is just as I remember it.

That's just what *Age of Mythology: Retold* producer Earnest Yuen had to say when I spoke with him about the remake, which will release this year on PC and Xbox. Yuen has worked at Microsoft for nearly a quarter-century, starting as QA on the first *Age of Empires* – it's clear that his love for the series runs deep.

"*Age of Mythology: Retold* is way beyond what we normally do for definitive editions," says Yuen. He and the team want to make the game as epic, engaging, and pretty as players remember it, rather than simply updating what was there. "We want to build the game in your head."

That means using changes to the graphics and game engine that were made for the *Age of Empires III Definitive Edition*, then going beyond that. The start is "adding ray tracing, upping the population limit, [and] adding an engine to handle special effects," according to Yuen. Population limit in particular will be a big change for *Age of Mythology* not just in how visually impressive it is, but in the fundamentals of how it plays. Strategies in *AoM* were often boxed in by the strict limits on units set by the limitations of the day's graphical tech – even if it was widely praised at the time.

ANOTHER BIG TWEAK COMES IN HOW MUCH CONTROL YOU HAVE OVER YOUR MYTH UNITS

Another big tweak comes in how much control you have over your myth units. Back in 2002 they just used their powers whenever they were off cooldown – but no more. "In *Retold* what we are doing is we actually make that user-controllable, you can actually micro and use that when you want to," says Yuen.

GODLY POWER

The other huge change is in your god powers: rather than one-and-done bolts of lightning that will never reappear in a match, those powers are now on cooldowns. It's a huge change to how *Age of Mythology* plays, but has been well-received by the cadre of high-level, competitive *AoM* players recruited by Yuen and the studio to participate in playtesting.

FIRST LOOK

"The god power change is both great for esports and for watching the game," says Yuen, because you know that lightning bolt or meteor is coming back around soon. "That anticipation makes it much more fun to watch."

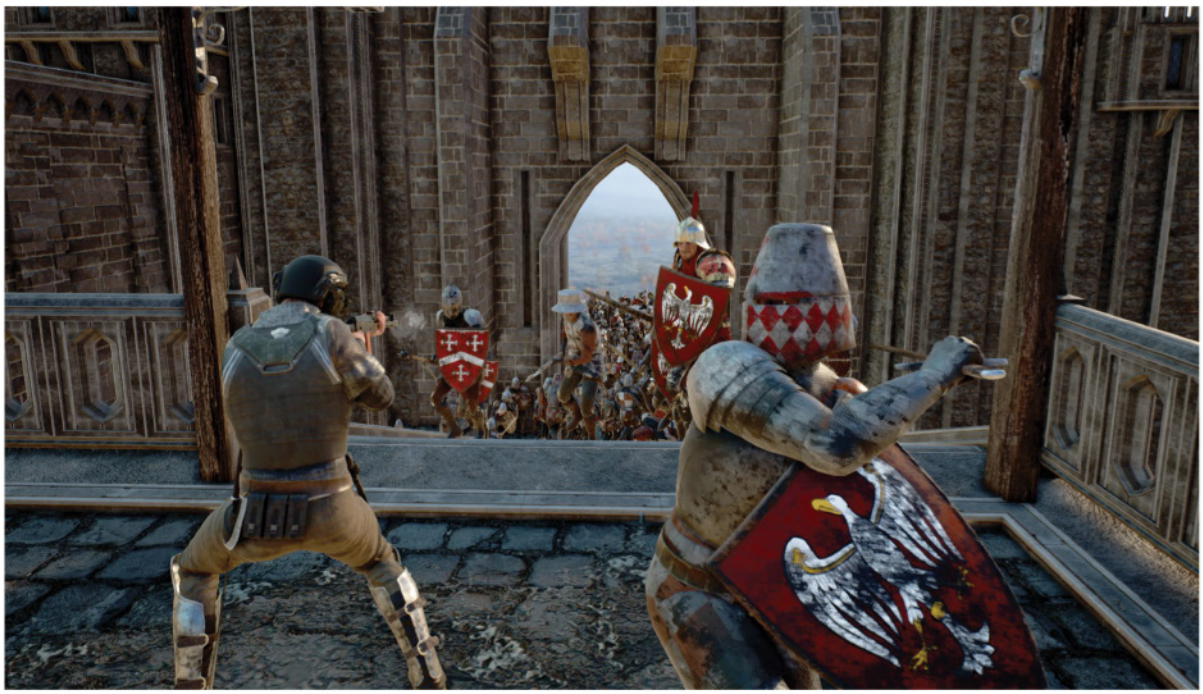
The hope there is that by making the game a bit more accessible, and helping it conform a bit better to modern expectations of what an RTS is, they can encourage some of the fun stories they've heard from players of the past *Definitive Editions*, whether that's participating in a revitalised competitive play scene, watching tournaments, discovering a classic, or enjoying a game they loved as a kid with their own kids.

The updated interface is a given for a remaster like this, but game balance changes are vital as well. The Microsoft team still wants it to be a remake that emphasises how great the original was, not discard what made it great in the first place.

Jonathan Bolding

ABOVE: 'Tis but a flesh wound!

RIGHT: It's a lovely day in the village, and you are a horrible time traveller.



The cavalry has arrived.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
2024	Redemption Road Games	tinyBuild	tinybuild.com

KINGMAKERS

Just another medieval combat game, with attack helicopters

The first 22 seconds of a game trailer can tell you a lot. They set the scene, perhaps flash some publisher or engine logos, and establish the setting of the game in an easily digestible way. In *Kingmakers*' trailer, we see armoured warriors clash on the field of battle.

Aha, you think. I know what this game is all about. With *Manor Lords* also donning its armour and hefting its sword in this issue, it might be forgivable to think that PC Gamer has been taken over by fans of medieval warfare. And while that might actually be true, following the siege of PC Gamer Towers in 2020 that saw nasty trebuchet injuries all round, it's the 23rd second of the trailer that shows *Kingmakers* isn't ploughing the same ridge and furrow as its fellow feudal system admirers.

On the 23rd second, a truck drives into the struggling melee. It takes a run-up first, accelerating between dark-future ruined skyscrapers before some Back to the Future-style time travel flashes, then emerges for a spot of 15th-century roadkill as men at arms fly over its bonnet and are crushed beneath its wheels. Our intrepid protagonist, who seemingly has no sense of fair play, goes on to headshot someone with a pistol before blowing swordsmen into a fine red mist with a shotgun, and later stands on a castle wall with a grenade launcher and rifle, sniping a commander off his horse before dropping explosive little gifts into the swarming throng.

ON THE 23RD SECOND, A TRUCK DRIVES INTO THE STRUGGLING MELEE

It's quite a thing to behold, like a zombie horde game in which the undead are heavily armed and well trained, but the chaos is tempered by sections in which you're able to switch to a *Total War*-style top-down view to position and command the squads under your control. There's also a *Fortnite* flavour, with you placing buildings to build what could be a base that needs defending.

APOCALYPSE

What's going on here is, apparently, simple. You've been sent back from the future to help avert the apocalypse by altering the course of history. Or at least by blowing it up a bit. At one point in the trailer, an Apache helicopter chops across the battlefield, the bodies of soldiers both mounted and on foot flying apart in its wake. There will be airstrikes too, though it's not clear if you'll be the one at the controls. The huge crowds of soldiers to take on – we're promised thousands of them fighting at the same time – make it appear akin to games such as *Dynasty Warriors* or *Earth Defense Force* as you carve your way through.

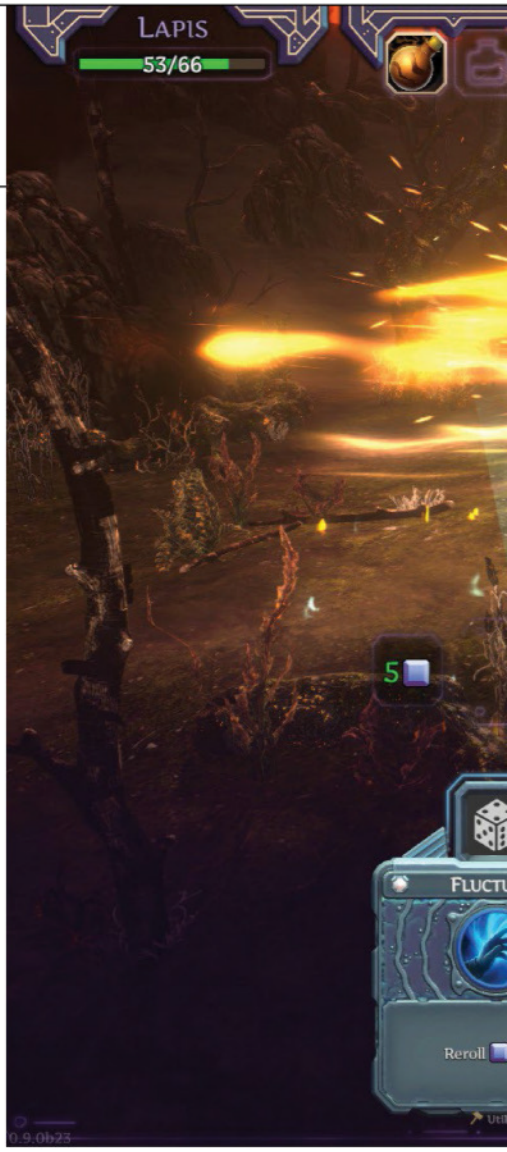
FIRST LOOK

What it mainly is, however, is a glorious romp in which you gun down hundreds of medieval soldiers with weapons beyond their imagination. A snatch of a far-future setting in the trailer raises the possibility of guns even more advanced than the ballistic shooters used for most of the killing, but it's also possible to go old-school, fighting melee duels against knights in armour.

There's also co-op, and the thought of four friends bringing guns to a sword fight, tearing through whole regiments of infantry and cavalry with assault rifles and grenades while screaming at one another down the voice comms is enough to either sell you on the game completely or make you run for safety.

Kingmakers will enter Early Access on Steam later this year, and comes from Redemption Road Games, which made 2019 biker gang actioner *Road Redemption*. All we have so far is the trailer, but the strength of the basic idea shines through the chaos it displays, and with time ticking down before we get to play it, this is one that should grace quite a few players' wishlists.

Ian Evenden



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
February 2024 (Early Access)	Guidelight Games	Ghost Ship Publishing	spellrogue.com

SPELLROGUE

Remove the randomness of dice with smart thinking and maths

S*pellRogue* is a roguelike that makes you feel like a genius. As you pick up spells you'll start to create combinations that just feel too powerful and would surely have been nerfed if the developer had noticed. Then, after a while, you'll realise this is exactly what they wanted you to do.

Best described as *Slay the Spire* but with dice, *SpellRogue* is less about building a big deck of spells and more about making the most of your limited options. You'll start out a run with three base spells and can add up to four more. You'll have access to all seven spells every turn, but you will need to roll some dice and get some luck to use them. Some require specific numbers whereas others just require a numerical total, so you could put a six, a three and a one into a spell that requires a value of ten to cast it.

There's a good amount of variety in what the spells can do, but for the most part, they all boil down to three main areas. Spells that do damage, spells that give you a shield for incoming damage and spells that either give you a positive status effect or your enemy a negative one. While you can build an all-out damage set of spells that all require high dice rolls, you'll quickly realise that luck plays too much of a factor in fights, and to succeed you need to minimise the randomness as much as possible.

THERE'S A GOOD AMOUNT OF VARIETY IN WHAT THE SPELLS CAN DO

PLAYED IT

I'M A GENIUS

The first time I beat *SpellRogue* my system was all about rolling ones. Thanks to an upgrade to a spell I got early, whenever I dropped in a one it would do four damage to any enemy, and give me +1 barrier. A barrier is a permanent shield that regenerates every time you hit End Turn and I could cast this spell three times a turn giving me a massive automatic block after just a few rounds of combat as well as dealing damage.

But rolling three ones, when by default you only roll three dice per turn, is almost impossible. So that's where I purposely selected spells that could influence the dice. By the end of my run, I had multiple spells that could change the value of a die, and other bonuses that gave me even more dice to roll per turn. So not being able to brute force my way to having at least three ones each turn was a rarity.

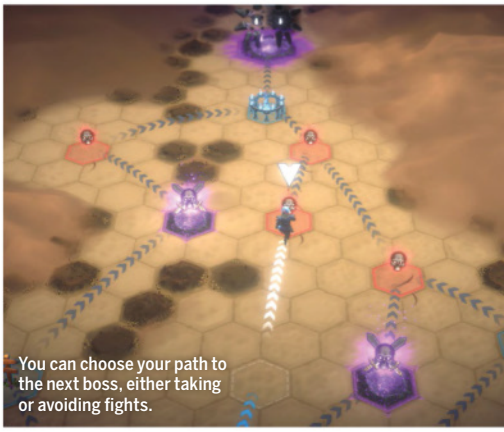
Add in a couple of high-damage spells I could throw the high-value dice in and quickly I was able to take down the most powerful enemies I met on my run while taking little damage thanks to the barrier. It felt like I had broken the game and found an exploit that would surely be patched.

Then, as I started my next run with another of the three characters I realised their base spells could be used in another combo. Whereas I was increasing the value of a roll to go above six and get extra dice with a value of one, these spells could automatically cast low-level dice, and some of the damage spells hit harder based on how many different dice you drop in. So putting in six ones would do significantly more damage than a single six.

CLICKING

This is when it clicked that building combos that remove the luck of the dice is exactly how you are supposed to play, and while I felt like a genius initially discovering it, I quickly learnt that without leaning into these synergies your runs will end early. Now I'm on a quest to find the strongest combos possible, and judging by some of the achievements, there's still a lot left to discover.

Mike Stubbs



You can choose your path to the next boss, either taking or avoiding fights.

ABOVE: Some fights can be explosive.

LEFT: With tons of status effects there are probably countless combos to discover.

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A NEW DAWN

A whole new world of adventure awaits PC gamers in bold new expansion **FINAL FANTASY XIV: DAWNTRAIL**

By Mollie Taylor

It's been a wonderful decade of adventuring for our Warriors of Light, but *Final Fantasy XIV* isn't done with us just yet. While *Endwalker* wrapped up the Hydaelyn-Zodiark storyline, Square Enix has flung the door wide open on a whole new adventure in upcoming expansion *Dawntrail*.

It's an exciting new arc that's awaiting us, one which director and producer Naoki Yoshida described as "the very best summer vacation" during last year's Las Vegas Fan Festival. I'm sure it'll be a much-needed pivot from the world-ending doom and gloom the Warrior of Light has dealt with for the last few years, and I'm dying to know more about just what *Dawntrail* will bring. Thankfully, I was able to have a chat with Yoshi-P – the nickname Yoshida is more widely known by – to see what's in store for us in the new expansion and what the future of *Final Fantasy XIV* has to offer.

It's quite fitting that Tural, the setting of *Dawntrail*, is also known as the New World. As we set sail for a new continent, I wondered if everything we've come to know of Eorzea would be left behind. Though *Endwalker* saw many loose ends tied up, there's still a lot we don't know about the Allagan Empire and Ascians despite their constant presence since the beginning. Thankfully, Yoshi-P assured me that Eorzea and all its worldbuilding won't be forgotten. "The world setting is not something that stagnates, but is created and expanded with your adventures," he tells me. "So, as the world of the adventure expands, there is also a 'past history' that is created anew. In other words, we continue to update our world to ensure the adventure for our players is one of excitement. Therefore, I do not think that we will close the book on the Allagan Empire of the Ascians. You see, the world is made up of continuities, for they are all connected."

It's reassuring to know that we're still going to see old foes and lore nuggets cropping up as *Final Fantasy XIV* expands on its other continents. I've been playing the MMO for almost ten years now, and Eorzea holds a special place in my heart. Though we can whizz around and teleport at will, I'm still grateful to know that canonically we'll be able to continue learning more about the regions we've spent years exploring.

Of course, that doesn't diminish the excitement in exploring new zones. My favourite part of each expansion is seeing what new areas there are to explore, and *Dawntrail* feels extra special because we're venturing off the continent. We've seen a few of these already thanks to the Tokyo Fan Fest: There's the town of Tuliyollal which is sporting some serious Mesoamerican vibes that continue out into zones like Urqopacha and Yak T'el.

Then there's something so distinctly different, I haven't stopped thinking about it since its reveal: Solution Nine. It takes the plush forests and stone buildings from above and hits the flip button, giving us an ultra-futuristic city with huge skyscrapers and neon lights. It's been giving me some huge Academia from *Final Fantasy XIII-2* vibes, and I've been seeing plenty of *Final Fantasy IX* comparisons being tossed around too.

I attempt to squeeze some more information out of Yoshi-P around its place in the story and any additional details, but he's being mighty coy about the whole thing. "This area is at the core of a great mystery in *Dawntrail*, and any attempt to discuss its positioning or design inspiration would inevitably lead to spoilers," he said. "So, let me keep it a secret for now."

Does that just make me even more freakin' curious about the whole thing? Of course it does. Solution Nine feels nothing like anything we've seen in this vacation-centric bonanza, which makes it the perfect place for secrets galore. We've still no

BELOW: We'll be seeing a lot more of the Mamool Ja as we head to their home region of Yok Tural.

AN ULTRA-FUTURISTIC CITY WITH HUGE SKYSCRAPERS AND NEON LIGHTS

XIV

idea just what the mystery is yet, which is making me even more excited to dive into *Dawntrail*.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

We already know there's going to be more to explore outside of the expansion's zones and dungeons too, as Yoshi-P revealed that field exploration zones à la *Stormblood*'s Eureka and *Shadowbringers*' Bozja would be making a return. Despite the two zones garnering some fairly heavy criticism at the time, it's safe to say that they were a sorely missed feature in *Endwalker*.

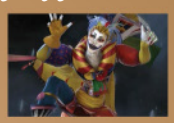
I ask Yoshi-P about the scope of *Dawntrail*'s planned field exploration,

FINAL, FINAL, FANTASY, FANTASY

Here are some of my favourite references

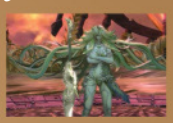
RETURN TO IVALICE: STORMBLOOD

These *Final Fantasy XII*-themed alliance raids are fun. Sure, one of the bosses tortures you with maths, but the fights and visuals are still unrivalled.



SIGMASCAPE 4.0: STORMBLOOD

Final Fantasy VI's Kefka remains the coolest series villain, so it's no surprise he makes an appearance. He even gets a rearranged version of his theme, Dancing Mad.



BARBARICCIA: ENDWALKER

One of the many *FFIV* references in *Endwalker*, Barbarricia has a fantastic modern design and a fun hair-filled and windy fight to go along with it.

THE MANDERVILLE GOLD SAUCER: A REALM REBORN

You can't do *Final Fantasy* references without *FFVII*, and what better way to honour the game than with its giant casino complete with minigames?

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NEW HORIZONS

Taking a peek at what's to come in Dawntrail

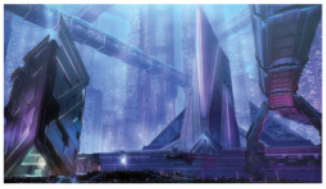
NEW DUNGEONS

Mystery Dungeon #1
These don't have names yet, and I won't attempt to invent one. It's very lush and tropical though, with caves and rivers ripe for exploration.

Mystery Dungeon #2
Much colder compared to #1, with giant purple crystals and a strange aura. It looks like there's a fortress higher up, too. Mysterious.

NEW AREAS

Tuliyollal
Yok Tural's seaside town with some gorgeous South American-inspired architecture.



Solution Nine
A futuristic town lined with neon lights and towering glass skyscrapers, located in Xak Tural.

Yak T'El
A plush zone, home of the Xbr'aal group of Hrothgar and the Mamool Ja.

Shaaloani
An arid zone, giving big old-school desert vibes complete with mine railways.

NEW JOBS

Pictomancer
What if Banksy was a catboy? Pictomancer trades a sword for a giant paintbrush that can be used to draw pictures of elements and beasts to bring down enemies. All I can draw is a stickman, will that do any damage?

Viper
What's better than one sword? Two. Quick strikes can be mixed up by connecting both blades into one mega-weapon for big damage.

NEW PLAYABLE RACE

Hrothgar

After nearly five years of only male hrothgar, we're finally getting the female variation of this *Final Fantasy X*-inspired race.

and while I didn't quite get the answer I was looking for, I was offered a great insight into the overall plans to create pockets of exploration content of all sizes. "We're attempting to perfect *FFXIV* on a slightly larger scale, as opposed to an expansion basis," he told me.

Part of that has been tweaking things throughout the years, making things bigger in *Stormblood* with "not only enhancing simple battle content but providing a type of play that allows players to explore large areas", before scaling it back towards the end of *Shadowbringers* and into *Endwalker* with "content geared toward small parties" and working on features like the Trust system to enable more of the story to be cleared solo.

Thanks to all that work, Yoshi-P tells me, "I believe that we are now prepared to cater for all kinds of needs, and in [*Dawntrail*], I'd like to aim for enhancement and a leap forward in content whereby players fight

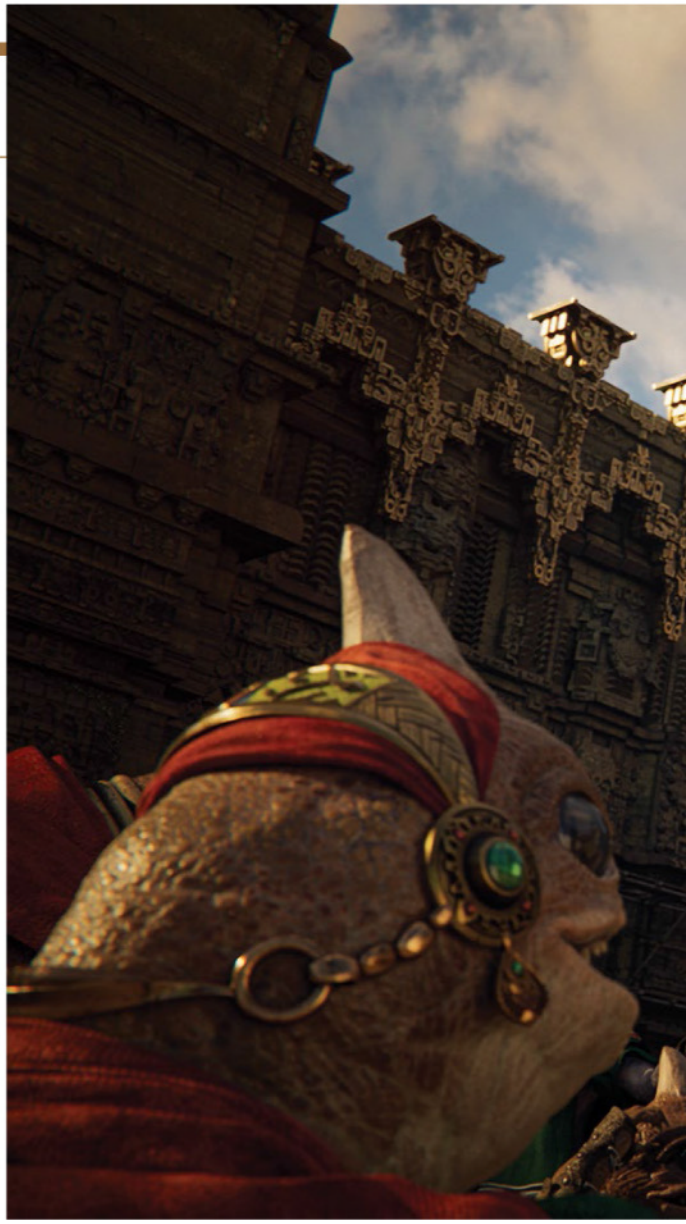
I WAS OFFERED A GREAT INSIGHT INTO THE OVERALL PLANS

alongside a large group of comrades in *FFXIV* as an MMORPG, while also displaying diversification of the aforementioned gameplay aspects." Part of that means the return of Bozja/Eureka-esque field operations, which Yoshida admits to me "have been requested a lot in the community".

Variant dungeons are also a part of Yoshi-P's plans to "expand ***FFXIV***'s content". A new addition in *Endwalker*, variant dungeons have drawn some praise but a lot of criticism alongside it. I wondered if variant dungeons would be scaled down or retired entirely down the line, but that doesn't seem to be the case, with Yoshida revealing, "Alongside the large-scale content, we have several proposals in the works for the variant dungeon series!"

PAINTING A PICTURE

It's not all pretty new places to walk around and explore, though. As is the standard with every expansion, we've got two new jobs to enjoy in the dual-sword swinging Viper and



colourful magic caster Pictomancer. The latter is definitely where my personal interests lie, as someone who mainly plays support classes like Dancer and casting jobs like Summoner. Pictomancer has traditionally been a support class in the *Final Fantasy* series, but magical DPS classes in *Final Fantasy XIV* are traditionally more damage-heavy compared to the slightly more support-centric physical ranged role.

When I ask Yoshi-P about this, he is sure to clarify that he doesn't want to necessarily box these roles into the confines I outlined. "We do not have a rule in our team that all support roles are to be left to physical ranged DPS jobs," he says. "So we cannot tell what will happen about this point moving forward."

Yoshi-P did tell me that Pictomancer won't have a ton of support abilities, but "when compared with Black Mage, there are some synergy-related actions for the party members but this isn't the main aspect of the job". Sounds like it'll be something a little closer to a Red Mage or Summoner, something that I'm totally down for.

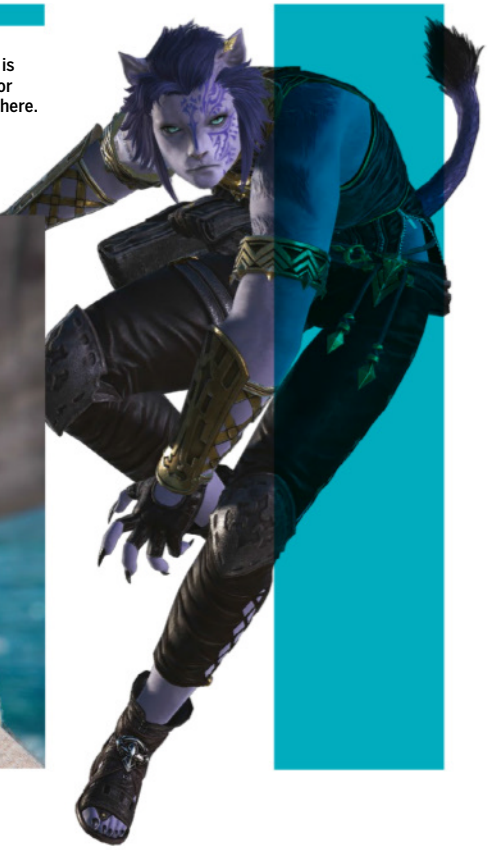
I do always appreciate how *Final Fantasy XIV* plucks various aspects of the series and works them into the MMO, and it's something you can see all the way back in *A Realm Reborn* with the *Final Fantasy III*-inspired Crystal Tower raids. That's continuing in *Dawntrail*, with the new alliance raids being themed after MMO predecessor *Final Fantasy XI* and allied tribe Pelupelu coming from *Final Fantasy X*. I ask Yoshi-P if there are any games in the series he is champing at the bit to work in: "We have many plans and ideas, and will continue to incorporate the essence of various titles from the series to serve as a theme park for the FF series," he says. "Simply put, my personal wish is to approach *FFVII* in earnest, but with the *FFVII Remake* series in development, I don't want to get in their way. I would be very happy if we could do something after the *Remake* series is completed, and I'd like to ask players to support the *FFVII Remake* series as well so that this can happen as soon as possible!"

Outside of cribbing from the *Final Fantasy* series, there's been a whole host of collaborations over the years. From *Fall Guys* to Japanese superhero franchise Garo, there have been a lot of bizarre crossovers taking place. Some have come back, while others like the much-requested Yo-kai Watch collaboration are still awaiting their return. It perhaps won't be too long a wait though, according to Yoshi-P.

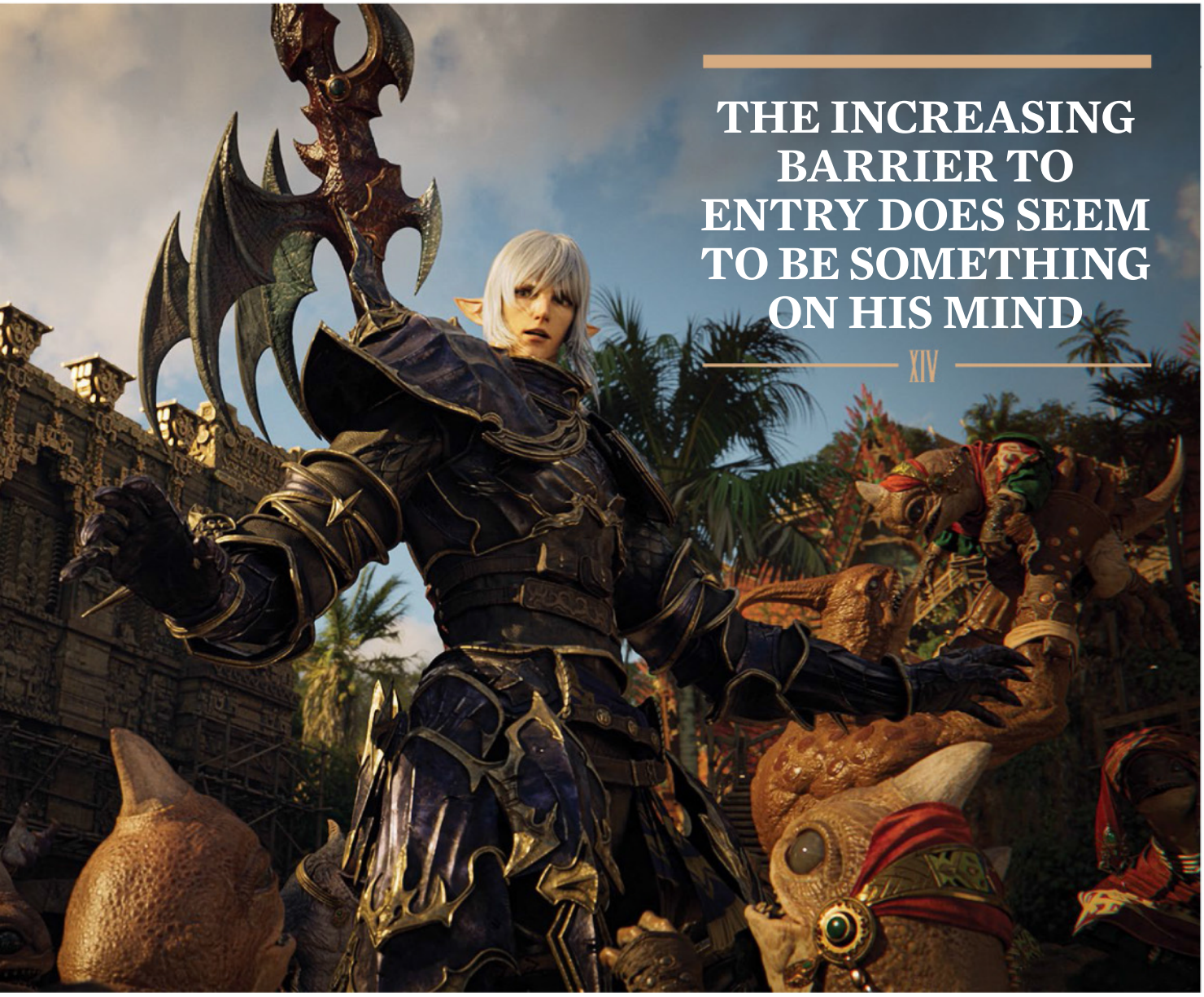
When I mention how hungry the community has been to see the Yo-kai event in particular return, he tells me: "We have received similar feedback from around the world, and with a few power-ups, it looks like those Yo-kai might just be making their return!"

THE ROAD AHEAD

There's so much to look forward to, but for newbies, getting to *Dawntrail* is gonna take a long time now. There's an entire base game and four



ABOVE: Estinien is giving some major babysitter vibes here.

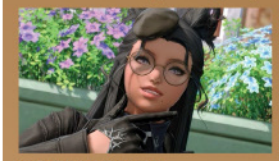


THE INCREASING BARRIER TO ENTRY DOES SEEM TO BE SOMETHING ON HIS MIND

XIV

A FRESH UPDATE

Some neat quality-of-life changes incoming

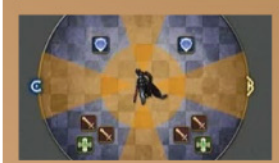


UNOBSTRUCTED EYEGLASSES

No more choosing between a hat or some nice specs. *Dawntrail* is giving equippable glasses their own slot so you can both see and look stylish.

MORE DYE SLOTS

Take a dye slot, double it, and bam, you got two. *Dawntrail* will have two dye channels for a ton of its gear, letting you experiment with more colour schemes and create unique palettes.



TIME TO STRATEGISE

Strategy Boards are coming to *Dawntrail*, offering a much nicer way to demonstrate mechanics and positionals. The UI is still in the works, but what we've seen looks like it's gonna be helpful.

PIXEL FACELIFT

Dawntrail will start to trickle in a larger graphical upgrade. Things like shadows and lighting will be given a nice revamp too, giving the decade-old MMO a shiny new coat of paint.

expansions to get through. *Final Fantasy XIV* is well into the triple digits for story completion at this point, and as the team continues to worldbuild, the more frightening it can be for newcomers to join in.

While paid story skips do exist, I had hoped there would be some sort of non-monetary option available to these folk. Yoshi-P had alluded to the possibility of it happening last summer, with the choice for players to dive in post-*Endwalker*. That won't be the case anytime soon, as Yoshi-P reckons it would lower the value of the overall narrative.

"We are not currently planning any kind of new skip feature," he told me. "This is something I'm constantly torn about, and we have already finished implementing a feature that allows players to learn about the story, setting and characters even when they skip the story. I'm concerned that if the globally acclaimed storyline can be skipped through a function, the value of the *FFXIV* game itself will be diminished."

The increasing barrier to entry does seem to be something on his mind though, "Please let me think about it some more. I do understand where you are coming from, so no need to worry about that."

You can still cough up a bit of money of course, and the news is disappointing for those who are intimidated by the time sink. But I do have to agree with Yoshida that half the fun comes from spending so long with such a colourful band of characters. With so many of them continuing the adventure with us into *Dawntrail*, it makes sense that Yoshi-P wants us all to get a little attached to them first.

We're still without a release date for *Dawntrail* – Yoshida has given the vague window of summer 2024, not wanting to repeat the two-week delay that *Endwalker* received rather at the last minute in 2021 – but there's still a lot to be excited about. So make sure to pack your best sunhat and your favourite class weapons, and get ready to set sail to the New World in a few months. ■

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BRA

OUT

ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE is FromSoftware's most ambitious expansion yet

By Rick Lane

N C H

You might well ask why *Elden Ring* needs an expansion. FromSoftware's brilliant fantasy RPG is already colossal in its scope and depth – several orders of magnitude larger than any game that preceded it. Yet any longtime fan of FromSoft's work would have a quick and definitive answer – expansions are where the studio typically does its best work. From *Dark Souls*' *Artorias of the Abyss* to *Bloodborne*'s *The Old Hunters*, FromSoft's expansions see its games at their most vivid, intense and strange. More than simple continuations of the base, FromSoft's expansions are often surrealist side adventures that fold back into the main narrative in surprising, yet essential ways.

Much like the base game, *Shadow of the Erdtree* aims to be exactly that, only more so. Following two years of silence, FromSoftware has finally broken cover on its hotly anticipated add-on, and everything unveiled suggests it'll be a classic example of the form. *Shadow of the Erdtree* will transport players to an entirely new yet strangely familiar land, shed light on one of the base game's most mysterious characters, and see players square off against the game's toughest foes yet. But it'll all be presented at *Elden Ring* scale,

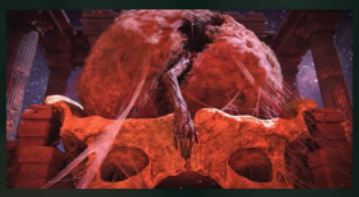
IT WILL TRANSPORT PLAYERS TO AN ENTIRELY NEW YET FAMILIAR LAND

essentially adding a whole other *Dark Souls* into the already vast RPG.

Shadow of the Erdtree takes place in the Land of Shadow, which like FromSoftware's other notable DLCs, is an area separate from *Elden Ring*'s setting of the Lands Between. Yet according to director Hidetaka Miyazaki, the Land of Shadow wasn't always decoupled in this manner. In an interview with IGN, Miyazaki said the Land of Shadow "technically occupies the same space as the Lands Between, the same universe," but

TRAILER ANALYSIS

All the big moments from the Shadow of the Erdtree reveal



HATCHING A PLAN

1 The trailer opens with a shot of a withered arm dangling from a cracked, round egg. This is Miquella's cocoon. Found in Mohgwyn palace deep beneath Caelid, it's through this cocoon players will access the Land of Shadow.

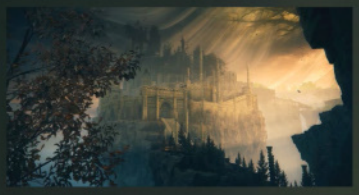
ON THE TRAIL

2 This area with the graves was shown in the key art, with Miquella riding on horseback. The fact that the Tarnished rides through the same area demonstrates that players will quite literally be following Miquella's trail.

KEY MOMENT

BOUGH TO YOUR MASTER

3 The tree looming over the Land of Shadow does not appear to be the Erdtree. Interestingly, Miquella's Haligtree has a similar split trunk, although one of the splits is broken when the player visits the Haligtree in *Elden Ring*. The veils above the tree, meanwhile, are similar to those suspended above Queen Marika's bed, perhaps hinting that the Land of Shadow is some dreamscape of Miquella's.



ASSEMBLING FARUM AZULA

4 This hulking fortress is similar to Crumbling Farum Azula, a late-game area in vanilla *Elden Ring*. Given how FromSoft expansions like to play with time and alternate realities, this could well be Farum Azula before it was consumed by a giant vortex.

LION ABOUT

5 This lion dancer appears to be a boss in *Shadow of the Erdtree*. The horns covering its body suggest that beneath the lion costume are a pair of Omen, large, ogre-like creatures afflicted by a curse and shunned by the followers of the Erdtree.

6 STUCK IN YOUR HEAD

It isn't clear who this character is, although the clasp on his robe is seen being worn by an elderly man in a painting earlier in the trailer. Stabbing someone through the head with a big stake, however, is precisely what a character called Messmer the Impaler might do.

THE WICKER MAN

7 This figure is directly referenced by Miyazaki, who calls it "a terrible weapon" that was "used in a war that occurred in the Land of Shadow". The burning stuff inside is "the remains of bodies that were put in there to burn".

PATH OF DAGGERS

8 Throwing weapons are plentiful in *Elden Ring*, but are also typically consumable items. These throwing daggers will apparently turn all your attacks into throwing attacks, though it isn't clear whether the daggers will still be consumed like arrows from a quiver.

WINGING IT

9 One of the last scenes in the trailer shows the player character sprouting a set of wings to battle Messmer. This ability looks similar to one used by the Crucible Knights. Perhaps *Shadow of the Erdtree* will shed more light on these warriors.

story events led it to becoming "physically disconnected" from the larger landmass.

The expansion's title, meanwhile, refers not to the literal shadow of the giant golden tree that looms over the Lands Between, but to a different tree that casts its pall over the Land of Shadow. Miyazaki describes the *Shadow of the Erdtree* as a "particular" entity "as opposed to" the original game's Erdtree. Although it isn't confirmed, there's a chance this tree is in fact a version of Miquella's Haligtree, an area visited by the player to the far north of the Lands Between. As we'll soon discuss, the elusive child demigod Miquella plays a central role in the expansion's story.

As for the Land of Shadow's size, Miyazaki describes it as "probably comparable, if not larger, than the area of Limgrave in the base game". Limgrave is *Elden Ring*'s opening region, and can take around 30 hours for new players to explore fully. But Fromsoft aims to imbue the Land of Shadow with denser design than *Elden Ring*'s existing regions. While the expansion will have a similar structure to these areas, featuring "open field maps with large scale legacy dungeons, and with small to medium scale legacies as well," Miyazaki has also said he wants to bring "these types of layouts together a little more seamlessly". Hence, expect the Land of Shadow to have more verticality and knottier pathways than *Elden Ring*.

One of *Elden Ring*'s biggest attractions was its grand, yet cryptic, fantasy tale, which drew from a story written by George RR Martin as the foundation for the game's lore. According to Miyazaki, Martin hasn't contributed any new material for the expansion, but he says that the "mythos that he created [is] involved in the creation of *Shadow of the Erdtree* in the same way". This is because FromSoftware only "took from a part" of Martin's story to create *Elden Ring*, while *Shadow of the Erdtree* derives from unused material in Martin's worldbuilding.

MAIN: Miyazaki says the Land of Shadow will be "denser" than *Elden Ring*'s areas.

Specifically, *Shadow of the Erdtree* focuses on Miquella, a character alluded to in *Elden Ring* but never actually seen (at least, not alive). The son of Queen Marika and brother to Malenia (arguably *Elden Ring*'s toughest boss) Miquella was cursed to be eternally a child and created the vast Haligtree as a cure both to his permanent infantilism and Malenia's slowly rotting body. In *Elden Ring*'s story, Miquella was abducted by another boss character called Mohg, and taken to his palace deep underground. But in a quintessentially *Elden Ring* move, Miquella separated his spirit from his body, with the former escaping to the Land of Shadow.

EMPYREAL MARCH

It isn't clear what Miquella's plans are in the Land of Shadow, but given how Fromsoft stories tend to roll, it's unlikely to be entirely benign. Although Miquella is portrayed as one of *Elden Ring*'s more likeable demigods in the base game, the DLC's trailer reveals that affability is the key to his power. The first spoken lines in the trailer refer directly to Miquella, stating, "Pure and radiant, he wields love to shrive clean the hearts of men. There is nothing more terrifying". It seems Miquella can compel people to like him.

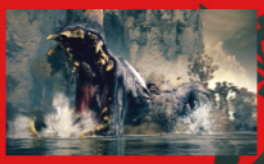
Miquella isn't the only character central to *Shadow of the Erdtree*. The expansion will introduce several new faces. This will include bosses and likeminded adventurers who have followed Miquella to the Land of Shadow. The character we know most about outside of Miquella is Messmer the Impaler. Messmer is the flame-haired chap sat on the throne on the first page. Miyazaki describes

IT FOCUSES ON MIQUELLA, A CHARACTER ALLUDED TO IN ELDEN RING

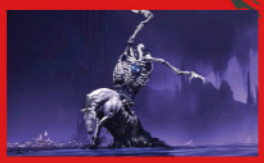
GUESS THY ENEMY

Attempting to categorise the new enemies

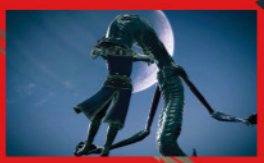
HOG SENTINEL
This fellow looks reminiscent of the Tree Sentinels in *Elden Ring*, only he's riding a giant pig.



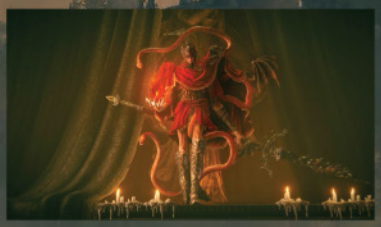
HIPORCUPINE
This creature can charge at players, but a power lets it generate huge spikes.



PALE RIDER
It's difficult to speculate what this thing is, although the horse is reminiscent of General Radahn's.



WORMLAD
It's a big worm, with arms, that eats you. Sorry, that's as much as I've got!



RIGHT: Looks like the Land of Shadow won't be all dark fields and gothic castles.

BELOW: *Shadow of the Erdtree* adds unarmed fighting options.

him as a "key figure" who "stands on equal footing to [the] other demigods and children of Marika".

Indeed, it's strongly implied that Messmer is another of Marika's children. His red hair is similar in hue to Malenia's, while his name follows the 'M' theme of all Marika's children. Moreover, in the trailer, the reveal of Messmer is dubbed over with the line, "Mother, wouldst thou truly lordship sanction in one so bereft of life?" Miyazaki says the DLC will explain "a little" about why Messmer is in the land of shadow and not in the Lands Between.

Alongside his role as a major character in the expansion's story, Messmer is one of ten new bosses that you'll fight across the Land of Shadow. As you'd expect from a FromSoftware DLC, battling them will be no cakewalk. Among these are several optional bosses which Miyazaki states are "tuned in a similar way to the likes of Malenia," arguably the most challenging encounter the studio has yet designed. High-level players won't be able to roll in and stomp these bosses either, as the expansion adds a new 'attack power' stat designed to mediate your progression across the Land of Shadow. .

Shadow of the Erdtree will arrive on June 21. There's no better time than the height of summer to take a holiday to a land of shadow.

GUIDED BY GRACE

Why we love FromSoftware's colossal RPG ELDEN RING

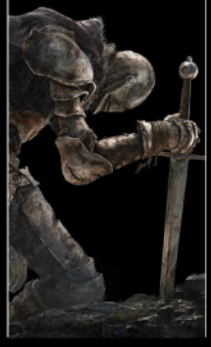
By Rick Lane

Land of open glory

FromSoftware applies its world design to a realm of vast scale

Exploration has always been a part of FromSoftware's games, but *Elden Ring* puts pushing toward the horizon at the front and centre of its design. Like most of the studio's games, *Elden Ring*'s key areas are guarded by brutally tough bosses. But *Elden Ring* doesn't expect you to beat them through pure skill or grinding attrition. Instead, the emphasis is on tracking down the tools that will help you overcome the challenge and gradually accrue power.

To this end, FromSoft builds a world that seeps adventure from every crag and crevice. Crucially though, The Lands Between aren't simply large and beautiful. Since the days of *Demon's Souls*, FromSoftware has exhibited a knack for infusing the familiar with the strange, beauty with horror, grandeur with corruption. *Elden Ring* takes these ideas and pushes them to the extreme. Each region of the map is at once a glittering pastiche of fantasy tropes, and a blighted perversion of those same ideas. Liurnia of the Lakes might seem like a fairytale idyll when you first glimpse its glorious panorama from the cliffs behind Stormveil Castle, but all that changes when you see how the magic of Raya Lucaria has warped the creatures that lurk in its marshland.



In this manner, each area finds its own ways to challenge and surprise. A small shrine hidden in a forest might prove to be the gateway to a lost city, while a rise in Limgrave's landscape can conceal the vast wasteland that is Caelid. As you push deeper, the obstacles you faced early on become tiny dots in the landscape, encouraging you to think back to those early hours battling against them, and how impossible they seemed all those hours ago.

Jolly cooperation

The real Elden Ring was the friends we made

E*lden Ring* is a largely solitary experience. But that makes its fleeting moments of connection all the more precious. Encountering fellow adventurers like Blaidd and Alexander, Warrior Jar offer welcome moments of companionship in a land that is generally hostile. FromSoftware has a knack for building relationships with such characters in a few lines of dialogue, although it helps that *Elden Ring* lets you summon these friends into numerous boss encounters. Indeed, *Elden Ring* has one of the best cooperative fights in the whole FromSoft canon, with the festival of Radahn letting you bring all your pals for a collective slugfest against *Elden Ring*'s cosmic general.

Of course, it isn't only NPCs who can help you in a fight. *Elden Ring* includes FromSoft's unique approach to multiplayer, which lets you summon other players to fight with or against you. Some of these players have gone on to become legendary figures in their own right, such as the pot-headed samurai Let Me Solo Her, who has helped countless players defeat Malenia.

Elden Ring also innovates on cooperative battle through the Spirit Ashes mechanic, which lets you select from a wide array of summons to help you in battle. These range from packs of wolves through sorcerers, to a ghostly clone of your own character. Indeed, the Mimic Tear version of myself became as close a companion on my adventure as any of the more established characters in the Lands Between.

Lore of the Ring

Following the golden thread reveals a tale of godly intrigue

E*lden Ring* unspools its story in a way much like other FromSoftware games, using item descriptions, visual references, and enigmatic dialogue to communicate a fragmentary narrative to the player. But like the game's giant, omnipresent Erdtree, *Elden Ring*'s story has a clear presence above the surface, while its roots are knotty, and hard to unpick.

On the surface, *Elden Ring* presents as a typical fantasy quest to reforge the Elden Ring and restore the Lands Between to their former glory, as ordained by the Erdtree's faithful Golden Order. But as you'd expect from a story coauthored by Hidetaka Miyazaki and George RR Martin, all is not necessarily as it seems. As you travel across the land, you encounter multiple different factions, each with their own aspirations for power and the fate of the Lands Between, from the followers of Ranni the Witch, whose desire to escape her destiny had dire consequences for herself and the world as a whole, to the recusants of Rykard, Lord of Blasphemy, who shun the faith that has built up around the Erdtree, and seek to murder those who would restore the Elden Ring.

AS YOU TRAVEL, YOU ENCOUNTER MULTIPLE DIFFERENT FACTIONS

The game's deeper lore combines the political intrigue of George RR Martin's own fantasy epics with the celestial scheming of the Greek and Norse pantheons. The assimilated history and mythology of the Lands Between is a bloody mess of godly family drama, religious schisms, love affairs, exiles and wars.

How much of this you uncover is largely up to you, and even pursuing every nugget of lore will still leave gaps unfilled. This room *Elden Ring* leaves for interpretation has led to some player theories about the themes for *Elden Ring*'s world. One suggests the game's lore is rooted in mycology, and that the Erdtree is in fact a giant fungus feeding off a stratum of death beneath the earth. Another posits that the Lands Between reflects the symbolism of alchemy, and that the Tarnished's quest is an allegory for the pseudoscience of transforming base materials into pure substances.

Colossal encounters

The enormous world allows for equally huge battles

Like all FromSoftware games, *Elden Ring* has a fantastic array of boss fights. But its much broader scope also facilitates some battles of truly epic scale. Some of the key boss fights are properly massive affairs. Most notable is your duel with Starscourge Radahn on the dunes at the fringes of Caelid, although the confrontation with Rykard, Lord of Blasphemy is similarly spectacular, if less challenging. The battle against the Fire Giant high up in the mountains also falls into this category, although this is generally regarded as one of the weaker boss fights in *Elden Ring*.

Nonetheless, many such encounters also happen while wandering around the world itself. The Lands Between are watched over by towering golems, whose ponderous movements and powerful attacks are clearly inspired by 2005's *Shadow of the Colossus*. Then there are the walking mausoleums whose ringing bells can be heard halfway across the map, and whose enormous stone feet can easily crush you as you attempt to cut them down. My favourite encounters in *Elden Ring*'s open fields, however, are the dragons. Battles against these overgrown lizards are always incredibly dramatic, making excellent use of the game's mounted combat.

SOME OF THE KEY BOSS FIGHTS ARE PROPERLY MASSIVE AFFAIRS

This time, it's personal

Exploring Elden Ring's varied RPG systems

***Elden Ring* is generally regarded as the most accessible of FromSoftware's games, but it would be more precise to say that it is the most flexible. Its emphasis on rewarding exploration also gives it the widest scope for character building, and FromSoftware go to great lengths to ensure all pathways to victory are equally rewarding.**

In particular, *Elden Ring* is easily the most enjoyable FromSoftware game to play with a magic user build. The game's voluminous spell book includes some truly astonishing sorceries, such as Comet Azur and Rennala's Full Moon, both of which let you launch celestial objects at your foes. Putting points into the Faith stat likewise unlocks a massive library of incantations, letting you wield the powers of dragons, or embrace the Frenzied Flame to defeat enemies by driving them mad.

Which isn't to say melee builds get a short shrift in *Elden Ring*. Quite the opposite. Alongside the game's extensive arsenal of melee weapons, *Elden Ring* introduces the Ashes of War. These collectable abilities attach to specific weapon types, imbuing them with unique abilities. Some of these enhance weapons with specific techniques, such as thrusting a greathammer into the ground to unleash a devastating shockwave, or facilitating a powerful somersaulting attack that can stagger the toughest foes.

Other Ashes enable limited use of magic, letting you call down lightning strikes or summon a phalanx of magical daggers that target nearby enemies.

There's enough leeway in *Elden Ring*'s levelling that you don't have to commit to one playstyle straightaway, and can combine different stat-based skills with weapons and Ashes of War to create highly specific fighting styles. None of this, of course, guarantees easy victory against the game's bosses. But *Elden Ring* never demands you fight them in a specific way, and if you're struggling in a particular fight, there's always another tactic you can try.

G.I. JOE
WRATH OF COBRA

Yo Joe! Cobra returns once again with its most fiendish plot yet and it's up to G.I. JOE to defeat them once more! Pick one of the real American heroes, gear up, and get straight into the fight in this retro side-scrolling beat 'em up.

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HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews

Road warrior

I don't know about you, but I spend far too much time behind the wheel of a car. And not in a pleasurable way, but a 'school runs and commuting' type of way. And, worse, when I'm not driving I'm fixing up the car to keep it roadworthy for more driving.

Thank goodness therefore that I can spend my spare time getting behind the wheel of a virtual car... wait a minute... [checks notes] and also spend time fixing up the virtual car... [checks notes again] hey, are we sure this is right, guys?

The thing is, though, as our *Pacific Drive* review shows, this is a fantastic game about fixing up, driving and making a personal bond with a car that's loaded with character, in a game that's packed with personality and quality. It's a unique experience not to be missed.

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer

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This month's buccaneering reviewers...

CHRIS LIVINGSTON

Specialist in
Stroking camshafts

Currently playing
Pacific Drive

This month
Legally married a Buick Estate. We all went to the wedding.

KERRY BRUNSKILL

Specialist in
Backflipping with guns

Currently playing
Tomb Raider

This month
Shot bats, lots of bats. Oh, and in *Tomb Raider I-III* she went and...

SHAUN PRESCOTT

Specialist in
Pieces of eight

Currently playing
Skull & Bones

This month
Shopped for parrots on Tortuga. A pirate must have an on-trend feathered friend.

JON BAILES

Specialist in
Mindless patriotism

Currently playing
Helldivers 2

This month
Dispensed FREEDOM and DEMOCRACY muchly and with extreme prejudice.

HEATHER NEWMAN

Specialist in
Midnight operations

Currently playing
Persona 3: Reload

This month
Spent far too long giving cutey Koromaru tickles behind the ears. Stayed up very late.

FAST & CURIOUS

Repair, improve and pilot a quirky station wagon in survival game PACIFIC DRIVE

By Chris Livingston

With sincere apologies to the Magnum Opus from *Mad Max*, the Saud Kruger Orca passenger liner from *Elite Dangerous* and Arthur Morgan's horse, I have a new favourite ride: the station wagon in *Pacific Drive*. It's amazing.

It didn't look like much at first: just a typical late '80s family wagon with wood panelling and a hatchback trunk. But over the course of the last 35 hours I've turned it into an armour-plated, radiation-resistant tank positively bristling with sci-fi gadgets. And it's only a little bit haunted.

Those upgrades (and the ghosts in the shell) are the result of barrelling through a hellscape of nightmarish weather, crumbling roads, and more horrifying anomalies per square mile than the entire *STALKER* trilogy combined. *Pacific Drive*, the debut game from developer Ironwood Studios, is a first-person driving survival game in which you explore a spooky and deadly exclusion zone to gather the resources you need to soup up your ride.

I'm declaring it right now: the station wagon in *Pacific Drive* is one of the best vehicles in videogames, ever. Unfortunately you have to spend a lot of time leaving it behind to run around on foot, and that's where the game falters a bit. But when you're roaring through the hostile world in that glorious, ridiculous wagon, *Pacific Drive* puts an exciting and fresh new spin (ha ha, because tyres) on the survival genre.

JOY RIDE

After mysterious science experiments in Washington state's heavily forested Olympic Peninsula went horribly awry, the government built a towering concrete wall around it and called it quits. Trapped inside the barricades of what's now called the Olympic Exclusion Zone, you've got nothing but your clunker, a workbench in a dimly lit garage, and the guidance of a few oddball scientists who chat to you (and each other) over the radio.

Nearly all of the survival systems are focused on your car

The zone isn't an open world: it's broken up into maps called junctions, with crumbling roads that wind through foggy pine forests, misty marshes, and charred hills. The only hope of escape is to explore the world one junction at a time, scavenging for supplies among the cluttered cabins, rusted car frames, and abandoned science workshops the government left behind. Back at your garage you use what you find to craft new and better car parts, research new tech, and repair any damage your wagon sustained on the journey. Most junctions will open up roads to new ones, and your map of the zone will slowly grow until you can chain together long multi-junction trips deep into the peninsula.

The zone, meanwhile, is furious that you're there and will do whatever it can to stop you from leaving alive. Bizarre and deadly anomalies populate these junctions, from crackling electrical entities that crawl along the ground and fry your car's electronics to massive spreading patches of deadly radiation that sap your health. Hovering mechanical monstrosities with dangling magnets yank your car off the road and drag it into the trees, while other entities will try to disassemble it completely by ripping off doors and bumpers. Tremendous weather events can arrive in moments with wind gusts so strong they'll push your car off the road, while geyser-like anomalies blast gobs of green goo into the air to rain down on you. These aren't separate events. These things can all happen at once and it's... a lot.

Developer Ironwood Studios seems to even know how rough its game can get, too: one biome's attributes are labelled 'Exhausting Explosions'. They sure were. That's an outlier though. Usually I found *Pacific Drive* a thrilling challenge, leaping out of my wagon to loot a building or peel the steel off an abandoned car, scurrying back just as a hovering menace began descending upon me, and flooring it while veering left and right to avoid spiky anomalies chewing through the ground, my dashboard bathed in sparks from an electrical blast. Gritting my teeth, praying my car's faltering parts would hold on just a few seconds more as I careened through the trees to reach a safe exit just as a mega storm hit. Exhilarating.

IRRADIATOR FLUID

In *Pacific Drive* nearly all of the survival systems are focused on your car. You, the driver, have a health bar... and that's it. Your wagon, however, is a network of wonderfully modelled vital organs. Doors, panels,

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A singleplayer first-person driving survival game with maybe the best car ever

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Ironwood Studios

PUBLISHER
Kepler Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-9700K, , 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4070 Ti

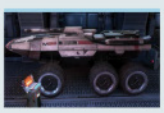
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
pacificdrivegame.com

FOUR-TO-SIX WHEEL HEAVEN

Other top vehicles in PC gaming

SCOUT CAR
HALF-LIFE 2
This dune buggy was one of the most memorable parts of *Half-Life 2*, carrying the player across beaches, coastal roads and dirt tracks in style.



MAKO
MASS EFFECT
Yes, this six-wheeled tank-turned-utility vehicle handled like crap, but it sure made traversing alien worlds quicker and squishing enemies easy.

MIGHTY FOOT
DUKE NUKEM FOREVER
The game it's in is mostly memorable for the wrong reasons, but crushing aliens with Duke's truck was plenty of fun.

Diagnosing quirks and problems can get interesting.

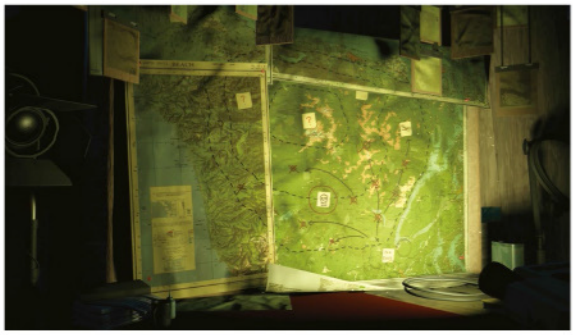
I'm sure it's going to be fine. Yep, no worries at all.

LEFT: *Pacific Drive* can be absurdly pretty at times.

BELOW LEFT: *Half-Life 3* confirmed!

Taking a breather between dodging deadly anomalies.

It's not a looker, but it's all yours to upgrade and mod.



RIGHT: Every aspect of the car slowly wears out over time, needing to be replaced.

BELOW RIGHT: Scavenging for materials is crucial, but you're vulnerable outside of the car.

Looks bad, but not as bad as the M25 at rush hour.

Better make sure you've got enough juice for car lights.

bumpers, windows, tyres and other parts and pieces each have their own health bar and are susceptible to physical, electrical, acid, or radiation damage, plus loads of other status effects: tyres can go flat, fuel tanks can leak, batteries can short out, wheels can become loose.

And no matter how diligently you tend to your car's bumps and scrapes, over time everything slowly wears out. Just like in real life, you can patch a flat tyre repeatedly but eventually it will go bald and have to be replaced. The durability system is rough, but I kinda love that components in *Pacific Drive* eventually die. Duct tape and a blowtorch can prolong the life of a part, but not forever. It feels fair.

What's the equivalent of eating and drinking, for cars? Fuel and electricity, I guess, and I've done everything I can to keep my car's metal belly full of nutrition. I have a battery under the hood but also one on the roof and a third mounted in the back seat. I have two ridiculous gizmos I crafted and lashed to the sides of my car: a turbine to capture wind power, and a sci-fi gadget that somehow converts rainwater into electricity. That's science, right?

The important thing is that while driving in the wind and rain my battery will now slowly recharge itself. I'm a good car dad. I'm feeding my beautiful wagon-child.

A full battery is massively important because I've got other crafted science gizmos crammed all over my car, and they need tons of juice, including a resource radar that can pinpoint the junk I need during supply runs, which makes each excursion more of a surgical strike than a cross-my-fingers search. I have a massive floodlight mounted on the side of the car for night missions, and a device that synthesises fuel from the zone's weird atmosphere.

Leaving your car feels like a vulnerable, naked act

I also have a literal lifesaver: a device that heals me when I'm sitting in the driver's seat, which is much better than standing outside the car and using a health kit. Best of all, I've got a forcefield I can activate that keeps those damn hovering anomalies from grabbing parts of my car and absconding with them.

Here's an actual quote from me the first time I watched those gross monsters trying to latch onto my car with their tentacles only to bounce harmlessly off my glowing energy shield, "Ha ha ha! Suck it!" I love this damn car.

Adorning my car with batteries and generators solves some problems but creates others. That roof battery and resource radar don't leave room for, say, a massive secondary fuel tank or storage container big enough to fit a set of spare tyres in. That means more time spent refuelling and patching damaged wheels, which means more time standing outside with anomalies bearing down on us.

Before each trip I need to spend time thinking about which attachments will be the most useful based on what I've learned about the zone's different junctions and hazards. Planning is important.

THE BUICK ESTATE STATION WAGON

The car that most influenced Pacific Drive's four-wheel star

One of the longest-running types of station wagon available in the USA, the Buick Estate was first introduced in 1940, with a model then brought to market in almost every year up until 1996. Multiple members of *Pacific Drive*'s development team experienced the Buick Estate at some time in their lives and, while making the game, bought one and photographed it to make the in-game car very detailed and authentic.

ODD IN 60 SECONDS

Repairs aren't the only attention you have to lavish on your car: your wagon will also develop 'quirks' due to exposure to the bizarre reality of the zone. My car's first quirk developed while I was in the zone in the middle of the night, already jumping in fear at every groan or creak from the woods. As I ran back to my car I noticed the passenger door was open – weird, I was pretty sure I hadn't opened it. I began getting paranoid as I noticed it open again a bit later. My mind raced: did something invisible get into the car?

Eventually I discovered that whenever I got out of my car the passenger door would pop open. It was a quirk, and not the last my car would contract. Diagnosing and curing quirks is handled with a fun minigame in the garage.

STEP ON IT

Much as I love driving my quirky car through the zone and tending to its every need in my garage, the actual act of gathering all those resources does eventually become a bit of a trudge. There's a thrill to scavenging for a while: leaving your car feels like a vulnerable, naked act as you scuttle fearfully into a building to collect junk or scrap the doors and tyres off a wreck. As anomalies and storms begin closing in, adrenaline will make the act of looting a cabin feel like a frantic and fun race against the clock.

I occasionally wish there were more ways to generate a few much-needed items at my garage like in other survival games. But then, this is a driving game, not a farming game. If I need something, I've gotta hit the road. Yes, the occasional overly-brutal zone excursion may leave me exasperated, and sometimes the resource collection tasks feel heavily repetitive, but they can't overshadow my fondness for this silly sci-fi station wagon. I'm always thrilled to roar back into the zone for another fruitful mission or frightful failure, and I'll happily spend ages in the garage repairing and replacing every single component using scrap metal, duct tape, and lots of love. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A novel and challenging survival game that puts you in the driver's seat of one the best cars in videogames.

86

LOST ARC

TOMB RAIDER I-III REMASTERED brings ancient treasures back into the light

By Kerry Brunskill

Lara Croft may need no introduction, but her first three artefact-swiping, wildlife-bothering, lever-pulling adventures were in real danger of becoming exactly the sort of forgotten relics she hunts for. *Tomb Raider I-III Remastered* hauls this trio of excellent action-adventure-puzzle hybrids and their original expansions – foundational examples of a style of game we're still enjoying today – back into action. This is the definitive version of these games, feeling both 25+ years old and also brand new at the same time.

Tomb Raider I-III Remastered runs fantastically: whether played on PC or Steam Deck, it scales to whatever my current display's maximum resolution is without effort or fuss. No matter how long I played or how many times I jumped between games, saves, or hardware, it never did anything other than work exactly as intended.

It never did anything other than work exactly as intended

The framerate didn't wobble even when I was mashing the game's dedicated graphics toggle button, seamlessly switching back and forth between the tastefully updated (and default) new look and the classic style, crude 2D keys and all. It works at any moment and is flawless.

These little sharp-edged worlds are the perfect place to play out all of my wildest Indiana Jones fantasies. At times they're as quiet as a tomb, the only sound Lara's grunts as she carefully picks her way across ancient pillars or shoves a stone block into place. But five minutes later she might be firing her iconic dual pistols at dinosaurs, or desperately running away from a crushing wall covered in spikes. Within the space of half an hour I'll have acted like a hero, an adventurer, a puzzle-solving genius... and an idiot who might have slightly misjudged that last jump and sent Lara plunging to her doom. Again.

OLD RAIDER, NEW TRICKS

Going in I assumed I'd spend most of my time in the retro mode's comfy familiarity. It's how these *Tomb Raider*s really look, after all, and I'm a big fan of early 3D in general, especially when it's handled as well as it is here, the right-angled environments clothed in pin-sharp pixelated textures, the lighting, skyboxes, boxy character models. Even the draw distance is just realistic enough to convey cracked stone, running water and broken tiles, but still leaves room for my imagination to have a great time filling in the gaps. I was surprised to find I was generally happy to leave the remastered graphics on, and more often than not impressed by the subtle (and not-so-subtle) enhancements that came with them.

On the whole this remaster straddles the line between retro authenticity and shiny modernity shockingly well, the repetitively tiled landscapes instantly recognisable without looking like a complete eyesore on modern screens. New 3D foliage, spider webs, items, light shafts and other miscellaneous details that were previously either painted onto ground, presented as flat objects, or simply nonexistent are so well integrated it's easy to believe they were always there.

For all the things I'm glad they've so very carefully kept – the ability to save/load anywhere, the timeless soundtrack, even the supremely creepy way the gaze of a mummified guardian will follow Lara around the room – some things really should have been left in the past. Running water sound effects are on the same short artificial loops with clear beginnings and ends, irritating to the point that some locations are more enjoyable with the sound muted. The camera is rarely better behaved than it was 25+ years ago, too.

Bosses have far too much health, and that only highlights how basic the gunplay is. The AI across all three games has no answer for highly skilled battle tactics like 'standing still somewhere they can't reach and holding down the fire button', 'jumping backwards while shooting' and 'bothering to equip the shotgun'.

Playing through these remasters confirms that the original trio of games really were as amazing as I remembered them being outside those very '90s flaws, though. Every puzzle solved felt like a well-earned victory, and the sneaky swerves these games pulled as they plunged Lara into an unseen trap remain exciting challenges. Simply nailing a risky jump (and a manual ledge grab) to avoid certain death is still a rush of adrenaline here, a tension modern adventure games have buffed out. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Three legendary action-adventure games given a loving makeover

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Aspyr, Crystal Dynamics

PUBLISHER
Aspyr

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900HX, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
t.ly/2ID3W

TRILOGY TIMELINE

Three classic adventures in three years

TOMB RAIDER 1996
The original game sees Lara tasked with searching for an artefact called the Scion of Atlantis.

TOMB RAIDER II 1997
Lara must battle against a mysterious cult in order to discover the magical Dagger of Xian.

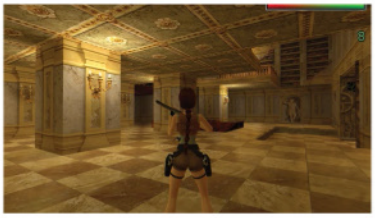
TOMB RAIDER III 1998
Follow Lara as she journeys across the world looking to recover four pieces of meteorite.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Tomb Raider I-III Remastered is an impressive and authentic update. Too authentic in some places, though.

78

You can easily swap between old and new graphics.



ABOVE: Combat remains basic, often involving simply backflipping away from foes while firing.

LEFT: Prepare to once again engage with some classic puzzles.

The updated Lara model captures the classic design.

ARR-RIGHT

SKULL AND BONES is a fun game that's hamstrung by today's live service conventions

By Shaun Prescott

The appeal of *Skull and Bones* is laser focused. It's about being on a boat. You have to want the fantasy of sailing big pirate boats and you need to not want much else for your time and money. You may come wanting to live the fantasy of being a ruthless waterborne pilferer, but to live that fantasy you first need to love sailing a boat in the direction of crafting materials.

In *Skull and Bones* you're allowed to get off your boat, but only to interact with vendors, mission-givers, mayhaps a buried treasure chest. In the vast island-dotted expanse of the Indian Ocean there are two major pirate settlements where blacksmiths, carpenters, refiners, and most contracts (missions) are doled out, both for the main quest and its endgame component.

There's also a great rash of outposts that are functionally identical, playing host to a handful of vendors, the odd treasure chest and some perfunctory loot. You can't whip your sword out and get all cutthroat. No, your violent desire to misappropriate various hot 17th century commodities is all done from behind the wheel. In many ways, you don't sail a boat: you are the boat.

After over a decade in development and with all the writing on the wall, I knew *Skull and Bones* would be *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag* by way of the waning full-price live service zeitgeist. I loved that older game. The boating around and the fighting with other boats lent a scale to the then-familiar *Assassin's Creed* format that seemed to blow salt up your nostrils and sand in your nether regions. It was richly atmospheric: you could smell it. *Skull and Bones* does recapture that atmosphere, but marrying it with the rigmarole of live service graft results in something lesser than that ten-year-old game.

The Indian Ocean is ridden with competing French and Dutch colonists

ROCK THE BOAT

After the usual tutorial preamble I reach the island pirate haven of Saint Anne. During the opening hours I must prove myself to Scurlock, a grizzled pirate king with some hectic daddy issues. That involves sailing somewhere, blowing up a number of boats, plundering coastal settlements via the defence of a small pocket of water, and then reporting back to the boss, whose unfurling of corporate and criminal conspiracy has the whiff of a compelling narrative about it. The Indian Ocean is ridden with competing French and Dutch colonists, but it's also infested by other pirates and privateers (also other players in the 20-player server, but they can't attack you on sight). As a pirate it's your duty to stick it to them all.

Since I'm a boat I have four sides and space for a central launcher, though whether all slots can host weaponry depends on its class. Gradually, new weapons become available if I buy the blueprints for them. In combat, the weapons – whether cannons, ballistae, rockets and more – trigger contextually, so that if I'm facing frontwards to an enemy boat, shooting will trigger that weapon, rather than the ones at my sides. Most of the challenge lies in

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A live service take on ship-on-ship combat, with origins in an old cherished *Assassin's Creed* game

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Singapore

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

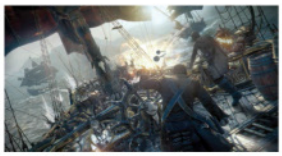
REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
t.ly/kTU3l

TOP: Weapons trigger contextually, dependent on which way your vessel is facing.

As a pirate your job is to stick it to everybody.



ABOVE: Plundering coastal settlements is a key part of the job.

FAR RIGHT: "What do you mean they've sold out of PC Gamer?!"

pro-actively manoeuvring my boat so that the cooldowns of each weapon have run their course when it matters. For more gruelling battles, planning for where all boats will be in 30 seconds' time is essential. This is often challenging because you're a massive boat, at the mercy of a massive boat's turning radius but also factors like wind, waves and the stamina of your crew.

The combat, when it's hairy, can be really tense and fun. In the early hours it can feel cumbersome, even horrible, until the logic of being a boat clicks. Ubisoft Singapore invented *Black Flag*'s (and *Assassin Creed 3*'s) boatfaring violence and the team has hit upon a great thing. Duking it out in the always tumultuous Open Seas region at night during fierce electrical storms is thrilling, especially when a rogue wave threatens to take out not only me but also the French bastards on my tail. The manoeuvring and the combat are gratifying, so long as one has the patience to control that boat through an endless parade of MMO-style quests.

SKULLGRINDER

In the spirit of modern live service game design, *Skull and Bones* never lets me perform a simple action when that action can be exploded into three separate actions across vast expanses of water. One does not simply buy anything in *Skull*

SHIVER ME TIMBERS!

Four other pirate games to try on PC

RETURN TO MONKEY ISLAND
Ron Gilbert's return to the point-and-click series that made him famous is buckets of piratical fun.

SEA OF THIEVES
If sailing around an archipelago in search of treasure with your mates sounds good then this is the pirate life for you.

SID MEIER'S PIRATES!
If a slower paced, more strategic piratical life if what you crave then Sid's got the goods.

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV BLACK FLAG
Took naval combat to a new, more exciting level. Stab and shoot your way to booty.

"That be a pretty landscape, says I."

ABOVE: You know what they say, the bigger the wheel the bigger the steal.

FAR LEFT: Being a pirate is 78% having a strong beard. Fact.

and Bones that matters: one embarks on a (normally) mundane odyssey to make it.

Let me paint a picture of the mid-game: I want to buy another Basilisk II cannon, because I've been rewarded one gratis for reaching the Marauder Infamy rank. It's marginally more powerful than my current cannons, and adds a marginal amount to my boat's overall power rank which, like *Destiny*, is determined by the level of the gear I have equipped on top of its base rank. I need to raise my boat's rank to tackle a main quest I'm struggling with.

So I set sail for the settlement where the Basilisk II cannon blueprint is held, because everything built in this game first requires a blueprint. I arrive some ten minutes later via conventional sailing rather than fast-travelling, because the latter costs silver depending on the distance, and I'm skint (who am I paying to fast travel me? Does God offer this service? Or Ubisoft?). I arrive to retrieve my longed-for Basilisk II blueprint only to find I need to be the next rank of Infamy, Corsair, to even buy it. I can already equip it! But I cannot buy the blueprint to make another. This came with no forewarning and so pisses me off. I was already dreading the resource grind needed to build the Basilisk II once I had the blueprint, but now I need to

RULE'S GOLD

Five genuine rules as dictated by the pirate code

1. Pirates should keep their piece, pistols, and cutlass clean and fit for service.
2. Pirates should not game at cards or dice for money.
3. Pirates can only continue to drink after 8pm if on the open deck of their ship.
4. Pirates who desert their ship will be punished with death or marooning.
5. Pirates must settle fights on shore, never on their ship.

grind the rest of my Infamy rank out to get it.

GRAND THEFT BOAT

After I've won Scurlock's respect I move onto the second pirate hub, Telok Penjarah, to do the bidding of pirate kingpin and former admiral Rahma, who has a very big bone to pick with the Dutch. *Skull and Bones*' early criminal misanthropy gives way to a narrative about resistance to extractive colonialism, but aside from Rahma's occasional soliloquy, the tonal shift has no effect on what I do on a moment-to-moment basis: set off, sail a lot, and blow up other ships. It's during this second half of the game where *Skull and Bones*' lack of on-foot conflict starts to feel discordant.

Before the endgame, few are the baddies who will attack on sight because the various factions and colonial organisations don't remember who I am after I've lost their scent after any given skirmish. It's basically akin to the *GTA* wanted level model. Scurlock is always saying in the early game that I'm building a reputation among these French and Dutch water cops. He foreshadows a tense allegiance-based roleplay that never materialises, because there is actually no such thing as a 'reputation' in *Skull and Bones* unless tied to certain late-game narrative beats. No matter how many dozen or so lowly Compagnie I slaughter a little off shore of one of their settlements, I become an innocent ol' pirate boat once I've sailed out of sight.

It's disappointing that my actions don't affect the world or my standing in it. It makes the world feel like a playground for resource extraction – quite the thematic disjunct! – rather than a risky and remote expanse. The whole game amounts to doing a bunch of busywork to get bigger and steal more stuff. Maybe this is a kind of documentarian depiction of the workaday graft of piracy; maybe it's meant to be demystifying.

PvP is often hilarious in a good way, especially in the PvPvE

THE ENDGAME

The Black Market is introduced early on as a side hustle in robbing contraband, moving the spoils around with thieves in pursuit, and creating rum and opium from pillaged ingredients. But it re-emerges as the central theme of the endgame, introducing both PvP and PvPvE encounters that if completed, help build a network of Manufactories that generate a certain amount of *Skull and Bones*' endgame currency – Pieces of Eight – on an hourly basis.

Each of these Manufactories need to be funded with silver every in-game hour, and each pay-off in Pieces of Eight needs to be manually retrieved and brought back to a pirate haven, which is dangerous because by late game there are more attack-on-sight pirates lurking. All Manufactories and attendant leaderboards reset when the next season starts. There's a lot here for those who want to stick around.

PvP is often hilarious in a good way, especially in the PvPvE situations where there can be upwards of ten boats in a small body of water and the action is relentless. The campaign is a good time for boat enthusiasts, but for anyone after something more challenging than the sourcing of materials on the high seas, this is where the game gets good. It's naturally still tethered to a grind, but it's more varied and comedic, and requires more thought given to the optimisation of a boat's weaponry. If anything, it offers a decent bedrock for further updates and tweaks to the formula.

Doing this in a co-op crew is obviously more fun than doing it alone; the same can be said for any game. But teaming up ad-hoc with randoms who have vastly different ideas about what should be done across a big stretch of water means that it's rarely worth it, because no matter how close or far I am from those presumed collaborators, the strength of the enemy ships is greater. It rarely makes the higher loot payoff worth it. Bring a friend who'll stick around and not wander off, and the cooperative experience is worth it, so long as you like the friend. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

***Skull and Bones* offers moody and gratifying ship-on-ship combat with shallow live service game trappings.**

68

TOP: Character models frequently look great, with plenty of detail on show.

Pirates are masters of delivering... explosive results. Sorry.

BUG HUNT

HELLDIVERS 2 is a masterful, hilarious squad shooter, when it works

By Jon Bailes

Picture the scene: four soldiers make a desperate scramble for their dropship on an alien planet, pursued by enormous, dagger-clawed bugs. Machine-gun fire rattles, green goo erupts, the landing pad teems with beasts as the quartet piles through the boarding hatch and their ride blasts off at the last available second. It could be a Hollywood action sequence, but in *Helldivers 2* it's merely the end of another mission.

Indeed, it's amazing just how often a *Helldivers 2* sortie climaxes in screaming, skin-of-the-teeth heroics. And it remains exciting time after time, because that Hollywood ending is never guaranteed. Maybe you get tagged yards from completing your great escape. Maybe by a spray of bullets from a wheeling teammate. Maybe the group's impossibly overrun, yet one of you somehow dives home and lives to tell the tale. Or maybe no one makes it at all.

STARSHIP BLOOPERS

It's not only the denouement of missions that make lasting memories either. In this four-player squad shooter (solo play is possible, but not much fun), every element harmonises explosively, resulting in scenes that really could have been choreographed for the movies. And, well, in a sense they were. *Helldivers 2* is unashamedly a mash of sci-fi action film tropes, with a large slice of Starship Troopers on proud display, sprinkles of Aliens and the Terminator series on top. Every line of its code works to recreate the feel of their scenes – panic, bravado, dark humour – through improvised mayhem.

You will be crushed, burned, impaled and blown up

Leaning into Starship Troopers' scenario is a smart choice for the tone of the game too. As with its predecessor, *Helldivers 2* apes Paul Verhoeven's 1997 satire at every turn, as citizens of Super Earth fight for freedom and democracy by offering their lives to the churn of endless war. True, the writing here is little more than a pale impression of its inspiration, yet it grants the action a glorious absurdity that sparks wild gambits and hilarity.

The appeal comes from the idea that, despite the propaganda, you aren't some Master Chief super soldier, but a hapless nobody, plunged into enemy territory to sacrifice yourself for vague ideals. You will be crushed, burned, impaled and probably blown up by equally out-of-their-depth teammates, so every onslaught you survive is a well-earned victory, and every death is a tragi-comic side effect of the situation. Besides, seconds after your demise, one of your squadmates calls in reinforcements, and before you know it you're barrelling down from orbit in a bullet-like capsule to rejoin the fray. Just hope they took care not to summon you near a pack of killer bugs or cyborgs.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The sequel to 2015's *Helldivers*, an online squad shooter inspired by Starship Troopers

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Arrowhead Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Sony Interactive Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

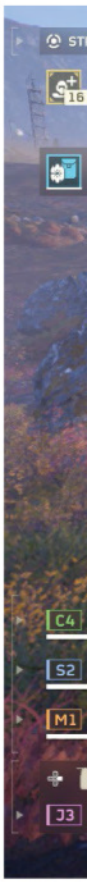
LINK
arrowheadgamestudios.com

HEAVY RAIN

One of the most consistently brilliant concepts in *Helldivers 2*, in fact, is that support always arrives from the sky, launched by your personal starship, which hangs like a satellite above your position. In many ways, this sequel is a remake of the first game with added live service progression and a switch of perspective, from top-down to over-the-shoulder, but that switch is a genuine game-changer, both because it makes the fights so much more up close and personal, and because of your connection with the heavens, as drops from above pepper the battlefield.

Not only do reinforcements arrive from on high – with a hefty thud that can smash fragile scenery or bugs – but so do what the game calls stratagems, which means equipment, heavy weapons and devastating firework displays of airstrikes and orbital laser fire. Each combatant selects four stratagems before landing, all restricted by cooldown timers, and managing these is the difference between being some schmuck holding an assault rifle and a few grenades, and a cackling exterminator who's a danger to insect, machine and human alike.

You see, air and orbital strikes are a quick way to decimate swathes of enemies, but equally the surest means of butchering your friends. You make the call by throwing a metal ball, which acts as the target point for the



DEATH FROM ABOVE *A selection of the tools of destruction*

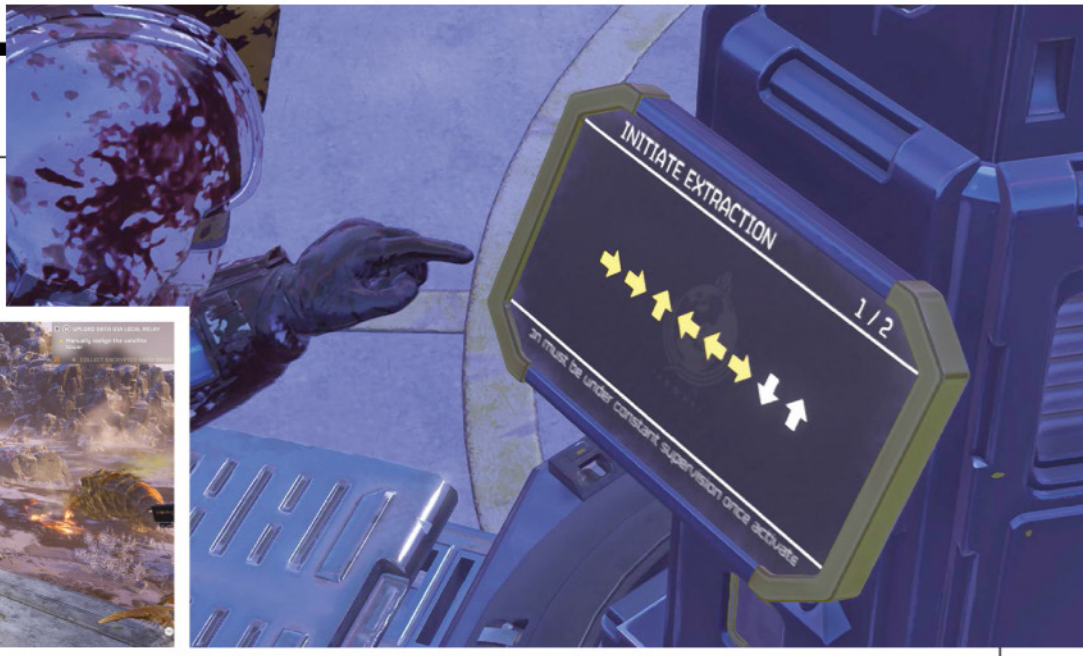
ORBITAL STRIKE
A brute-force earth scorcher from above, useful for taking out buildings as well as hostiles. Can also be used to coat an area in smoke or toxic gas.

EAGLE
A jet fighter is always ready to perform a deadly fly-by, hammering the ground with bullets or bombs as it goes. Steer well clear as it approaches.

AUTOMATED TURRET
A great choice when you're defending a position, thinning out crowds. It will only fire at enemies, but tough luck if you get in the way.

MINES
A pod scatters these around an area, and each one is visibly marked with a red light. That doesn't mean you'll always notice in the heat of battle, though.

HEAVY WEAPONS
From machine-guns to laser cannons and beyond, you'll need these to back up your standard kit. The largest models require assistance when reloading.



ABOVE: Mission objectives require a pause in the action to complete.

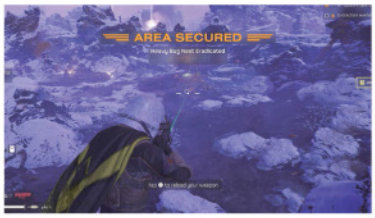
FAR LEFT: Commandeer turrets in bases to hold off enemy reinforcements.

BELOW: No need to shoot when you've got a personal guard drone.

ABOVE: When a teammate calls in an airstrike, get clear fast.

FAR RIGHT: Stay clear when the extraction shuttle lands, or get flattened.

BELOW: Bot troopers can arrive from any direction, including up.



barrage then a red beam appears from the sky and you have seconds to clear the area before the boom, the shake and a stunning display of smoke and flames. That red laser can thus be your saviour, or the harbinger of imminent death.

It's the same with automatic gun turrets, mine pods and beefy hand-held ordnance. You literally can't live without them, but their deployment might work against you, whittling down your reinforcement stock faster than the enemy could have hoped. And even with an organised squad, mistakes happen simply because skirmishes escalate so wonderfully stupidly quickly in *Helldivers 2*. One minute you're in tight formation, calmly pinging distant threats, the next you're diving behind a rock to avoid a charging beetle, its chums burrowing up on all sides, your team scattered. Before the dust settles, someone saves an ally from certain death, someone goes down in a blaze of suicidal glory, and of course someone punches an airstrike command and lobs the targeting device without checking your position first.

FIGHTING FIT

It's not any one element of *Helldivers 2* that makes it sing, however. They all conspire together. With the enemies, the numbers are huge – with framerate drops very rare – closing in like xenomorphs nesting in a reactor, but also the specifics of each kind force you to react differently, making you run, stand firm or dive to the dirt, scatter grenades or whip out a shotgun for close encounters. You learn that the bigger, deadlier creatures and androids have specific weak spots. Getting them in your sights is often a matter of using the terrain to your advantage or combining with a mate, one of you baiting the target while the other strikes from the rear.

Mission design, meanwhile, is involving and varied even at this early stage. From destroying bug nests or bot factories to grabbing soil samples or preparing the launch of an ICBM, objectives span multiple stages, which send you between traversing the sizeable maps to holding positions while stabbing inputs into terminals, manually moving machinery or waiting for processes to complete. Missions also offer sub-objectives, tempting you to boost your XP and currency rewards, with the caveat that enemy forces increase the longer you stay planetside. Such decisions can balance your efforts on a knife edge.

Monetisation is limited to armour, helmets and capes

The visuals and audio are spot on too. Each planet has a distinct personality – colour, natural cover, hazards, environmental features – while bugs are reliably disgusting and bots are as menacing as the Terminator influence implies. The sound is the star, though, from pitch-perfect gunfire, reload clacks and explosions, to the chitter and squeal of insects, the perfectly-timed "Eat this!" and "For democracy!" barks of your team, and a score that's equal parts jingoistic and dramatic. It's almost a shame to turn on your microphones, although advisable.

AIM TO SERVE

As for the service structure of the game, it doesn't feel intrusive yet and monetisation is limited to additional armour, helmets and capes. The endgame appears to involve the entire player base collaborating to liberate a spiral of planets around Earth – sorry, Super Earth – with a handful accessible at a time. Each time you finish a mission the completion target on that planet ticks up by one ten-thousandth of a percent, which is arguably the game's smartest piece of satire, showing you what your blood is worth. When a count reaches 100%, which happened only once in the first week after launch, that planet becomes unavailable and new ones open up. Presumably, developer Arrowhead has a hand on the dial here, ensuring progress isn't too fast or slow.

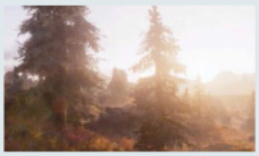
Still, after 20 hours of play, a sense of grind did begin to kick in a little. The quantities of XP and currencies required to level up and grab more powerful stratagems, weapons and armour push you towards higher difficulty levels, which are tough to manage without well-organised teams. It can feel like a bit of a Catch 22, in which you need better gear to tackle their challenge, but it's difficult to get that gear until you do.

That said, there's no doubt progress has felt slower than it should in *Helldivers 2* so far due to technical hitches. Losing your connection as you make that run for the dropship after a 30-minute mission is infuriating, as is arriving home to find you've not been awarded the points you'd earned. Arrowhead is clearly paying attention, at least, and that latter bug seems to have been squashed. The biggest issue left at the time of writing is with accessing a quick match, which can take minutes of repeated trying and failing even though plenty of games are available. Indeed, the large number of people playing *Helldivers 2* is apparently causing the problem by overloading the servers.

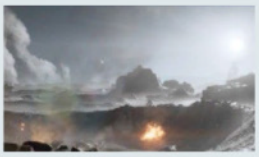
That's less of a concern of course if you have a team of friends ready to dive with, and despite the hiccups, those initial 20 hours have been joyous. The prospect of unlocking more planets and more toys to play with, plus a hundred more last-ditch sprints to the dropship, is far more enticing than the vast majority of live service propositions. ■

WISH YOU WERE HERE?

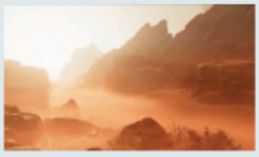
The galaxy's finest tourist spots



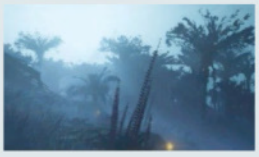
ANGEL'S VENTURE
One of the closest planets to Super Earth, Venture boasts impressive autumnal vegetation.



FENRIR III
Far less lush, this moon is actually rather grey and barren for the most part.



ERATA PRIME
While it's mostly sand, the rock formations make for some spectacular views.



MALEVELON CREEK
More of a tropical climate here. Would be nice to explore if not for the bot factories and barbed wire.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Server issues aside, *Helldivers 2* is a bombastic, strategically engaging and funny squad shooter.

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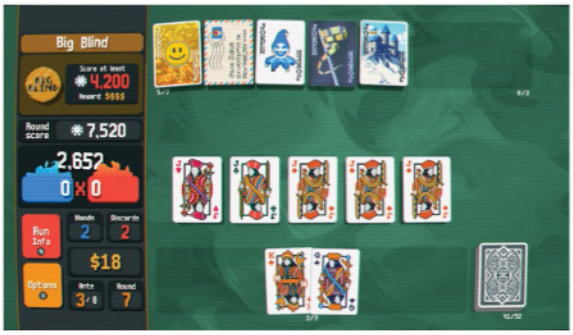
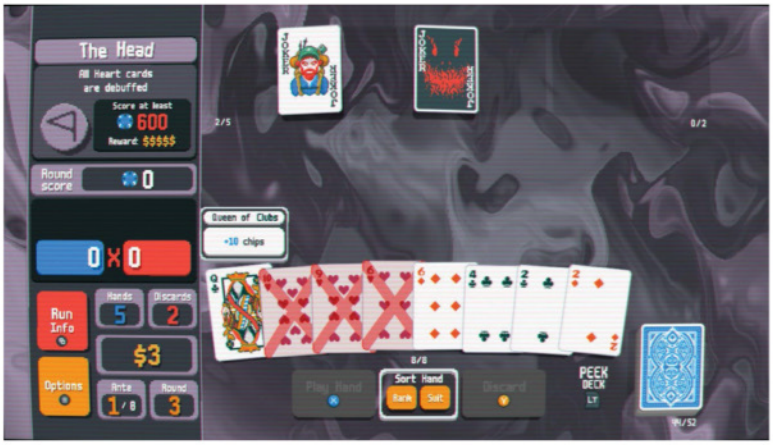
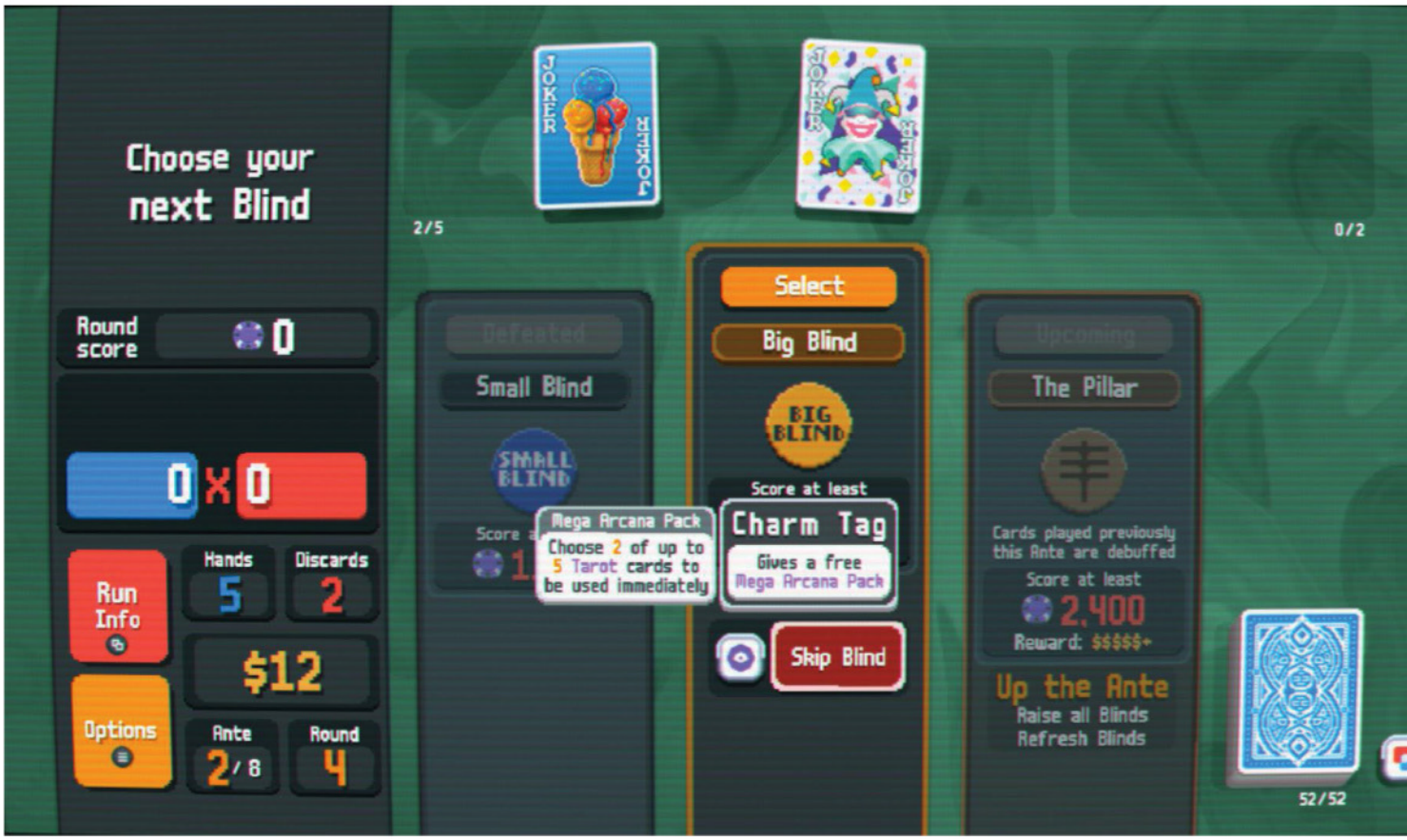


ABOVE: The all-important shop is the home of *Balatro*'s most agonising dilemmas.

FAR RIGHT: One of the easier Boss Blinds. Unless your strategy revolved around heart cards, of course.

BELOW: Blinds can be skipped entirely for other rewards. Deciding whether they're worth it is typically agonising.





STRAIGHT FLUSH

Cheaters constantly prosper in the sublime BALATRO

By Abbie Stone

Imagine the rush of winning at a high-stakes poker table. Now imagine you're winning because you're cheating so blatantly that you might as well be drawing your own numbers on the cards. You put down a 2, then another 2, then three more 2s, to make everyone's favourite poker hand, 5 of a kind. This is a constant joy in *Balatro*, a roguelike deckbuilder that successfully scratches an itch to cheat in a casino that I never even knew I had.

You start off with a deck of 52 traditional playing cards. Each round, you draw eight cards and can play four hands to try to score enough chips to beat the dealer's score. Each playable hand has a set score and multiplier – eg a pair gives 10 points and a x2 multiplier. The value of the cards you played to make that hand is also applied. So a pair of 10s would be 20x2=40 chips. Nice!

Hmmm, actually, considering the first dealer you face requires 300 chips to beat, you're going to have to learn to play more ambitious hands quickly. Hands like three of a kind (x3 multiplier), four of a kind (x7 multiplier) and Royal Flush (ha! As if). You get three opportunities to discard up to five cards and redraw in the hopes of building a superior hand. Deciding whether to settle for a weaker hand or burn through one of your precious discards is the first of many mini-gambles *Balatro* constantly forces you to make. Good, solid, slightly maths-heavy stuff, but it's the first visit to the shop where *Balatro* starts truly showing its hand.

You get three opportunities to discard up to five cards and redraw

You can buy cards that level hands up. A single High Card, with its pathetic x1 multiplier, is easily the easiest to make/worst hand in the game. Unless you level it up so much that it can eventually be as effective as a five-card Flush. You can buy Tarot packs that add modifiers to your cards, like extra chips given, money payouts if you discard them, or even massive multiplier bonuses for holding off from playing them at all. Invest in packs of playing cards and you can expand your deck so it can make that aforementioned Five of a Kind.

Then there are the Joker cards, sitting in a row at the top of the screen, happily causing chaos. You can have up to five of these potential game-changers in constant play.

CARD SHARK *Four Jokers to watch out for...*

FOUR FINGERS
Let's you make flushes and straights with just four cards. Try that IRL and you'll lose four fingers.

GROS MICHEL
Powerful banana gives a +15 multiplier. Ah, but also tends to destroy itself.

VAMPIRE
Drains enhancements from your cards, but offers multiplier boons in exchange.

BULL
More chips on your score the more money you have. Good for the greedy.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A roguelike deckbuilder where you cheat outrageously at poker

EXPECT TO PAY
£12.80

DEVELOPER
LocalThunk

PUBLISHER
PlayStack

REVIEWED ON
Asus ROG Ally

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
playbalatro.com

There's the Banana Joker, which will add a x15 multiplier to your score, but has a 1 in 15 chance of destroying itself after every round. Scary Face throws in a 30-chip bonus for every face card you use. The Hack lets some of the more rubbish cards like 2s and 3s play twice. Some jokers push you towards seemingly counterintuitive strategies, like discarding the highest-scoring cards for cash, or big rewards for only playing one card.

BLIND LUCK

All deckbuilders suffer from the inherent randomness of card draw. You're going to get particularly unlucky runs, and *Balatro* is more upfront than most about how many of its decisions are pure chance. But because it gives you so many options on how to improve your deck, and is forgiving of plenty of minor mistakes and mishaps as you experiment and improvise, it rarely feels like you didn't have a chance of strategising your way to success.

Have I mentioned how eerily beautiful it is? It's like watching a poker game on a cursed TV accidentally tuned to 1972, filmed by a crew gradually coming down from hallucinogens. But this isn't one of Devolver Digital's acid-aesthetic nightmares, more gently surreal and oddly soothing.

This is an absolute triumph, the reason Valve should rename their handheld 'the *Balatro* machine'. That it's the developer's first game is just rude, frankly, equivalent to going to Vegas and drawing a Royal Flush first time. Something I bet I could pull off with the right mix of cards. I can't wait to spend another 60 hours finding out. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A playing card deckbuilder debut already worth of joining *Slay the Spire* at the king's table. Essential.

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EDEN PROJECT

Death is just the beginning in BANISHERS: GHOSTS OF NEW EDEN

By Tom Sykes

B*anishers* imagines a world where the restless dead are a common occurrence, be they wisps, giant monsters or chatty ghosts bearing unfinished business. Much as you'd call a plumber to fix a leaky pipe, here you send for a Banisher to remove a troublesome spirit, either by hacking it to bits or peacefully ascending it to another plane of existence. They're basically Witchers, but without the genetic experiments that leave them emotionally bereft.

If anything, *Banishers* is a game that goes the other way, practically wallowing in the full emotional palette as you aid a landscape that has been torn apart by trauma. There's the trauma of the resident ghosts – many of which are literal manifestations of anger or sorrow – but also the trauma of the two main characters, Antea Duarte and Red mac Raith, who have recently been separated (in a manner of speaking) by Antea's death.

That death occurs shortly after the couple arrive at New Eden, a colony in 17th-century North America that has been beset by a terrible curse. A permanent winter has taken hold of the place, and the veil between life and death is wafer-thin, resulting in intrusions by violent spectres and the sudden death of their old friend, Charles Davenport. He has been killed by a powerful spirit that resides at the town meetinghouse, and so it's there that the Banishers head to, well, banish it.

Antea's death hardly stops her making an appearance

Alas, it doesn't go to plan and poor Antea is killed by the vengeful spirit, leaving Red alone on the outskirts of town, where he comes to after being heaved into the sea. So begins the long journey to both find the means to destroy the spirit, and return to town to reclaim Antea's body, which Red will need before he can send her spirit onwards.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A story-focused action RPG where you play as a ghost-hunter and his ghostly partner

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Don't Nod

PUBLISHER
Focus Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

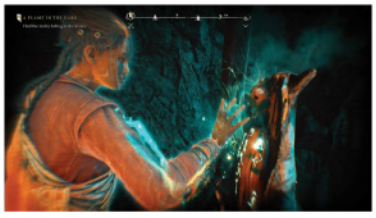
LINK
focus-entmt.com/en/games/banishers-ghosts-of-new-eden

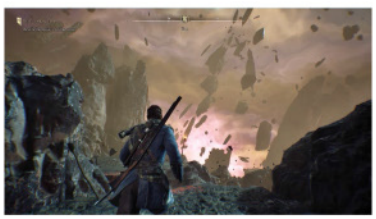
Of course, in such a world, Antea's death hardly stops her making an appearance, and she soon returns as an active partner in Red's personal mission. While Red can touch things and talk to living people, Antea sees into the realm of the dead, where she can use her ghostly powers to destroy obstacles and unveil hidden items. You'll switch between them at the touch of a button, as you make use of their complimentary abilities to investigate hauntings and pummel ghosts into the afterlife.

LOVE IS...

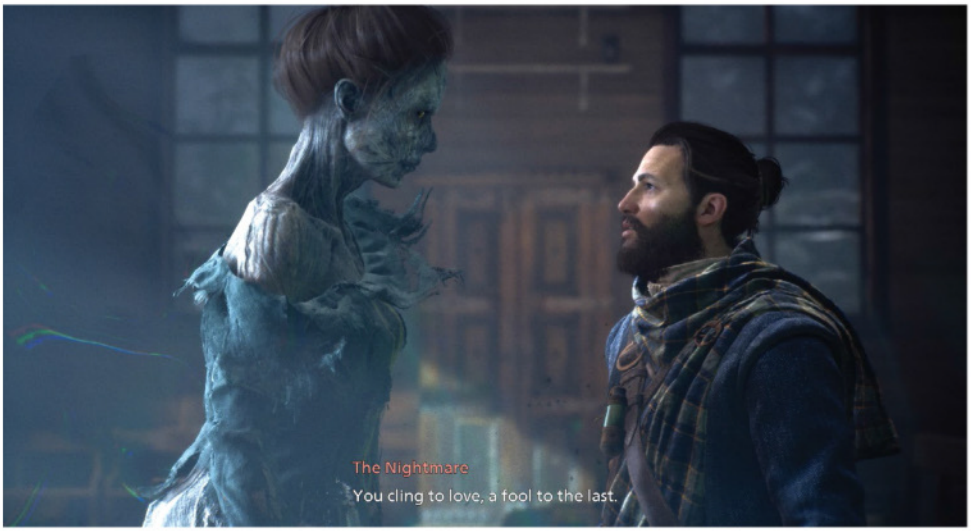
While we often have party members in games like *Mass Effect*, there aren't many RPGs that feature two protagonists – and surely no others where they're in a relationship from the onset. It's refreshing to see the bickering, flirting and reminiscing of a mature couple, and to have that dynamic be present for the entire game.

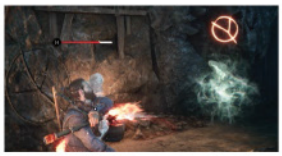
I'm really quite fond of Antea and Red, now that I've seen their story through to one of the multiple endings, although for a long time they just felt too perfect to be relatable. It was only later on





RIGHT: The Nightmare (a very bad ghost) who's haunting the town.





TOP: Secrets abound, including these dangly things that house magic ingredients.

ABOVE: Antea can teleport short distances, handy in exploration and combat.

– when the easy back-and-forth that comprises their banter began to slip away, allowing deeper conversations to emerge – that I finally became attached to the couple.

I should note that I've only seen one of the two major endings teased at the start of the game: do you give Antea her ascent, and usher her into the afterlife, or use black magic to return her spirit to her body? Those aren't spoilers, by the way, but the major goals you spend the game working towards, as you either peacefully help New Eden's residents or (gulp) kill them to fuel Antea's return.

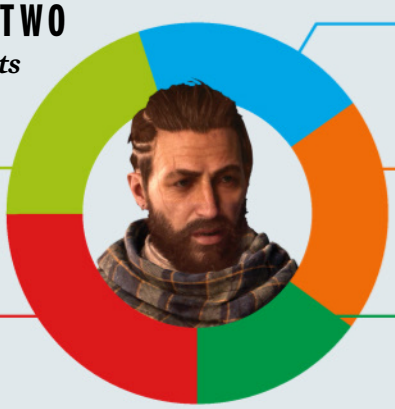
These are the decisions you'll have to make at the end of most main quests, and every side haunting, as you choose to murder the person haunted by a ghost, or leave 'em be, as you send the spook on their merry way. I was tempted to take the evil path, because the game seemed to be pushing me down it, while Antea's growth as a spirit makes much more sense in that context, but in the end I stubbornly played this as my usual saint. But whichever path you choose, the game recommends that you stick to it, as you'll need to murder a lot of settlers to power the resurrection spell, and if you flip-flop there might not be enough.

GHOST TOWN

Banishers' story has a very different flavour than most RPGs, in that

EDEN FOR TWO

The ingredients in Banishers' cauldron



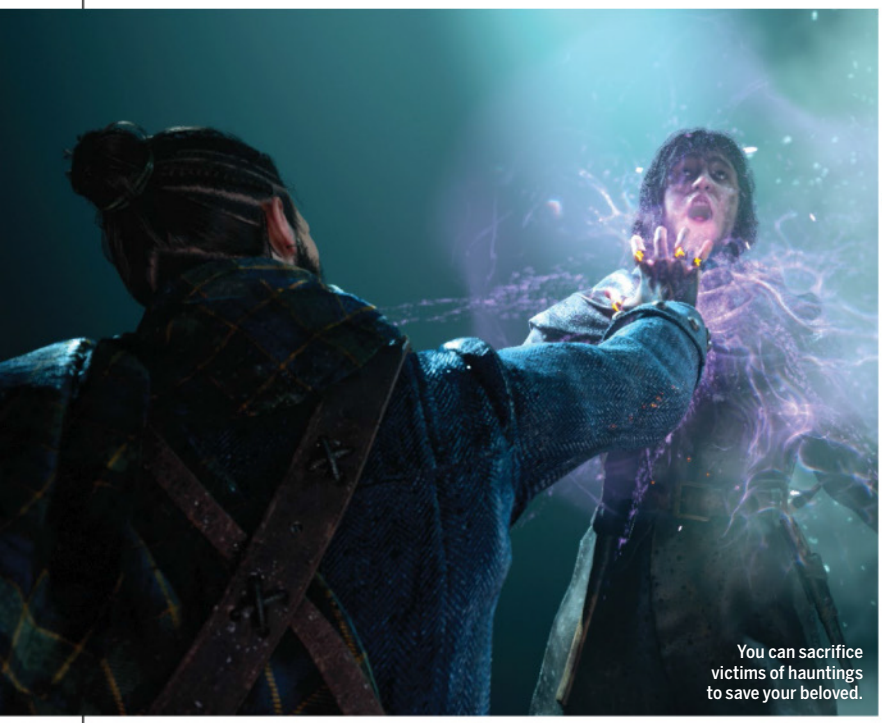
20% VAMPYR
Another Don't Nod game that gives you the choice to kill or save NPCs.

25% TOMB RAIDER
Both have Metroidvania-esque maps, and bonfires.

20% THE WITCHER 3
Quests are a similar mixture of investigation and combat.

20% THE CRUCIBLE
The story involves a witch hunt, and both are set at a similar time.

15% DARK SOULS
The combat is reminiscent, although there are difficulty options.



You can sacrifice victims of hauntings to save your beloved.

TOP: Your first attempt to defeat the Nightmare doesn't end well.

you're striving to save a region, a small cast of people, and your beloved rather than the entire world. I mean this as a compliment (well, mostly), but it feels like a *Witcher 3* quest blown up into a full-size game, really giving you the chance to get to know one town and its colourful inhabitants.

Despite the supernatural overtones, *Banishers* is very much set in our world, at a time when witch hunts (if not witches) were very real. A witch hunt is central to the plot, with most of the major characters involved in some way, so as you might imagine they're not an overly pleasant lot.

Every haunting drags up a shameful backstory, whether it's for the settlers or their hard-hearted leaders, and while it is difficult to like a bunch of murderous, mob-minded bigots, I did take pleasure in bringing their dark secrets into the light. Their nuanced facial animations convey emotion with subtlety, even if that emotion is usually hatred towards the meddling Banishers.

After the devastating prologue, in which Antea is killed and Red wakes up in the wilderness, New Eden's residents flee the town and hunker down in the nearby forest, the mountains, and a lovely stretch of farmland surprisingly untouched by the endless winter. All are still affected by the curse, however, with ghosts infesting the wilderness and

GHOSTED

Partners in ghostbusting, but also in love

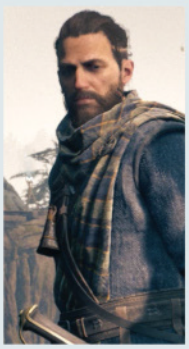
ANTEA

Is dead
Puts a spanner in the works.

And hungry
Needs to ingest spiritual essence to survive.

Meet the boss
Was Red's mentor before her death.

Born in Cuba
Before an event in the past made her flee her home.



RED

Is not dead
Comes in handy for opening pickle jars.

A good egg
Can he bear to say goodbye to his lover?

Or a bad one
Or will he sacrifice his humanity to bring her back?

Born in Scotland
I could listen to his accent all day.

the more sentient ones still coming back to haunt their loved ones. Before you can even hope to return to the town proper, you'll have to hoof it to each of these areas and solve their problems.

WILD AT HEART

The world of *Banishers* is so large that you'll spend most of the game just traversing it, climbing up cliffs and squeezing through loading gaps, shimmying across ledges and balancing on fallen logs. I suppose it's an open world, in that it's all interconnected, but you can never simply run over an open plain from one side of the map to the other (and, lamentably, there are no horses to speed up the journey). Instead, navigation is a constant puzzle, with the game funnelling you down narrow and more open pathways every time you need to get anywhere (there is fast-travel, but you can only use it at infrequent bonfires).

I was strongly reminded of *Tomb Raider*, the 2013 reboot, which had a similar Metroidvania tinge to its world design. There are barriers you can return to later, once you've unlocked the relevant powers, and tons of hidden gear and crafting materials squirrelled about the place. It's not often I look at a map and think it doable, perhaps even enjoyable, to return after the ending in order to tidy up, but I might actually attempt that with *Banishers*.

It helps that it's a gorgeous, varied landscape, encompassing woodland, coastline, farmland, snowy hills and swampy bogs. A couple of things give me pause – all that tiring navigation, which creates a sense of constantly feeling lost – and the combat, which I never really clicked with.

SPIRITED DEFENCE

It's all a bit *Dark Souls*, but locked into subtle arenas as creatures emerge from the ether to interrupt your exploration. Using your sword and gun as Red, and your various spectral powers as Antea, you have to wallop spooky creatures that come in a variety of denominations, from lowly spectres to massive bosses made up of multiple unhappy spirits.

Ultimately combat is solid but not especially thrilling

I appreciate the subtle differences between the protagonists, with Antea not having a health bar but a rechargeable spirit gauge that whittles down as she attacks, and Red relying on, essentially, *Dark Souls*' Estus flasks. And hey, *Banishers* has bonfires too, which similarly recharge your healing items while respawning enemies – but as you can save at any time, and just restart from your last save when you die, their implementation does feel a little muddled.

Ultimately, combat is solid but not especially thrilling, soon falling into a comfortable rhythm of weakening enemies with Antea, before finishing them as Red, with not enough variation in your abilities or weapons to feel like you have much input over character development. I never came to hate the combat, but I would always groan when I discovered a large-ish space that would obviously house the next encounter, although they are usually brisk enough to not outstay their welcome.

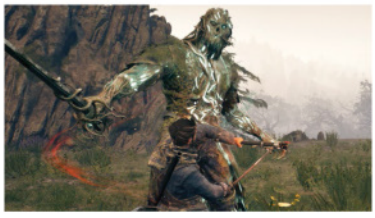
There is a lot of combat, just as there's a lot of getting from A to B, in a story that sadly feels stretched thin. The ghost behind the curse is only really present in the prologue and climax of the game, while the rest has you slowly teasing out her backstory. Everyone here knows what happened, but I have to defeat this massive beast in the forest, and clear out this haunted mine, in exchange for mere narrative breadcrumbs? I feel that one proper interrogation – where we could put the obvious questions to the major players – would trim the game by a good ten hours or so.

But while there's tension between a more personal story and the expectations of scale that come with an RPG, I'm still glad I docked in New Eden Town. It's an evocative place, rich in atmosphere, history and horrible deeds, and it feels rewarding to drag its injustices into the light. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Banishers **is stretched thin, but with a world worth exploring and ghost stories well worth hearing.**

74



TOP: There are various categories of ghost, including whatever this is.

Much is hidden from the living, including clues and loot.

LOOT TIME

LAST EPOCH is an action RPG for people who aren't that fussed about action

By Jody Macgregor

The first thing most people hear about *Last Epoch* is that it's an action RPG with a clever trading system. And that's true, it does have smart mechanics for bartering gear and ranking up your affiliation with the Merchant's Guild to equip better purchased goods, which prevents you from making some canny deals and immediately walking off in endgame armour. But the thing that's really clever is that you can opt out entirely.

When you reach the point where you're presented with the chance to join the Merchant's Guild, you can just say, "Nah, that's not for me". In that case, you join the Circle of Fortune, receiving an increase to item drops so you can find better gear out by killing people and taking their stuff just like Gygax intended.

As someone who could not care less about auction houses in RPGs, this is ideal. I'm not here to play the medieval stock market. This approach to trading is one of many smart decisions *Last Epoch* makes about items. Another is the loot filter, which lets you get real fine-grained about which gear affixes you want to see.

Crafting is another system with more thought than usual put into it. You can upgrade the bonuses gear has, add new ones, or remove them. The limits are each item's 'forging potential' and whether you have enough affix shards for the relevant bonuses. It's straightforward, and lets you do what you want to your gear without hassle. I just wish some of the effort that went into the crafting had gone into the combat.

It's not just a lack of feedback, but an imbalance of it

SLAY AWHILE

When a skeleton takes damage in *Last Epoch* they flinch by stretching their shoulders like they're enjoying a leisurely yawn. When I fire a glowing magic arrow or swing a blade that crackles with lightning, it looks like I've inconvenienced my target in a minor way. It makes me miss the dramatic clang and spray of blood when you hit a zombie in *Grim Dawn*. There's no oomph or impact. When I die it's almost always a surprise, because I had no idea I was even taking damage.

Meanwhile, my rogue's effort grunts when using abilities are so loud and pained I often check my health because I used her dash or something only to see I'm completely unhurt. It's not just a lack of feedback, but an imbalance of it. It doesn't help that the viewpoint will sometimes get completely blocked by a cliff or other obstruction and there's no highlight on characters when they're behind walls, leaving me to guess what's happening based on sound effects that aren't great at communicating on their own.

Combat's a little more enjoyable when I play a primalist, a class that's half-petmaster, half-Viking. He has a wolf companion but later can be accompanied by storm crows, a bear, or, with the right magic helmet, an army of squirrels. It's still lacking a certain meatiness, though, that prime-rib solidity you want from a hack-and-slasher. And it's a shame the classes are gender-locked, which feels like '*Diablo II* was the last good

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A *Diablo*-like action RPG with an emphasis on items

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Eleventh Hour Games

PUBLISHER
Eleventh Hour Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4060

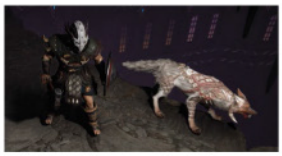
MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
lastepoch.com

ABOVE: I heard you like nodes.

Don't expect face customisation, it's not that kind of RPG.

Genuinely have no idea what's going on here.



ABOVE: The wolf is an extremely good boy, and will roll around on the ground when you stand still.

RIGHT: Perhaps unavoidable, it looks very *Diablo* at times.

Diablo and it must be copied as much as possible' thinking. (Even the monsters resemble *Diablo II*'s, only the Quill Rats are called Quill Hogs and the Blood Hawk Nests are Venomwing Nests.)

Last Epoch only lets you map five abilities at a time. It really wants you to stick to the same handful of powers. As you level up you can specialise in skills, though not many of them, and discover that each one has a node of unlockable options to enhance or reflavour it. Want to swap fire damage for ice, or a chance to stun? There are plenty of choices, but you only earn points for an ability's internal skill tree while you're specialised in it. Respec, and you have to start over with a handful of points, which encourages sticking with the same ones as much as possible.

The focus is clearly on the item mechanics, which means that loot hounds and build theorycrafters will have a great time poring over the difference between a bonus to Critical Strike Chance and a bonus to Increased Critical Strike Chance. If you come to action RPGs for the action, however, you'll find *Last Epoch* lacking. ■

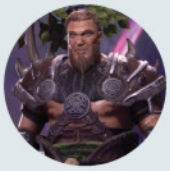
PC GAMER VERDICT

With its emphasis on crafting and trading rather than action, *Last Epoch* puts the cart before the horse.

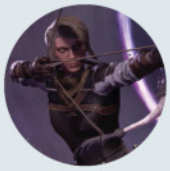
60

CLASS CHOICE *These player-character options feel familiar*

SENTINEL
Don't say 'paladin' where he can hear you.



PRIMALIST
Multiclassed barbarian/druid. Never had a bath.



ROGUE
The *Diablo* class we couldn't think of another name for.

ACOLYTE
Don't say 'necromancer' where she can hear you.

MAGE
The mage in a cage casts mainly backstage.

MIDNIGHT POWER

PERSONA 3: RELOAD is a big, beautiful revamp of the lengthy classic

By Heather Newman

Persona 3 Reload isn't just a re-release or hi-res tune-up of the 2006 turn-based classic _Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3_. It's a true remake, with nearly every aspect of the game other than the story changing in subtle or major ways. What feels like thousands of voiceover lines, impressive new persona animations, sharp graphic design and some nifty quality of life features give _Persona 3_'s solid story a high 2024 shine.

Sixteen years ago, *Persona 3* was a landmark release for RPGs. The way it combined a sim-style RPG about high school life with a dungeon crawler including both *Pokémon* androguelike elements gave it lots of depth.

Which is also a way to say that *Persona 3 Reload* is long. Really, really long. Enormously long. You're playing for a full year, one day at a time. Each day has multiple interactions and decision points. It typically takes more than 130 hours to meander your way through the game. I've enjoyed every hour I've spent in it.

It gives me choices with real consequences, and I love it

DAY AND NIGHT

You play as a transfer student, new to a town where people are afflicted by an apathy sickness that causes some to take their own lives. The culprit can be found in the Dark Hour, the secret time in the middle of the night when normal folks temporarily morph into coffins or get their souls melted. You and your friends, however, remain human during the Dark Hour and fight the shadows with the help of personas: alter-ego creatures and people you can summon to fight on your behalf.

In the daytime, you work on levelling up your attributes – studying raises your Academics score, for example, and singing karaoke alone boosts your Courage. Each activity lasts just long enough to reward your decisions; I never feel like I'm grinding pointless minigames.

You'll shop for the various items you need for dungeons in stores, in vending machines and via mail order, play online games, go out with friends or complete quests for them to strengthen your social links, which in turn strengthen persona types. There are dozens of ways to achieve the same goals, and each day is different.

The in-game calendar includes both the days and the phases of the moon, and many events and connections are specific to individual days of the week or months of the year. I couldn't just practice, and practice, and practice again on the track oval, because the team only meets a few times a week.

Return to an activity, and you'll find it different than when you left it, and decisions matter. If I choose to stay awake in class (to earn Academics points) instead of sleeping (to earn Courage), the five pop-quiz history questions I answer will show up on the midterm exam, rewarding my attentiveness. Having a bowl of ramen with a classmate might increase my social connection with him, and if I choose to go out with him again, his plans to ask a teacher out will have progressed, just as they would in real life. It gives me choices with real consequences, and I love it.

At night, the high school morphs into Tartarus, a giant tower of bad guys. Each section has a different architectural theme and shadows to fight as you ascend. The first section has multiple floors in a techy blue and black with a few shadows to fight in turn-based combat and chests to open on each floor. The second is a more organic-feeling, purple, curvy set of corridors that have giant faces set into the walls.

Your character has the unique ability to summon more than one persona and even combine them to create new ones, fusing a magician-cat-person Nekomata, or making that elven knight Tam Lin, for example. The combinations are wild, and if you don't cheat by reading online guides, unpredictable. It's great fun turning persona cards that look like monsters or priestesses into a Swiss maid, or a fractured combination of lion and eagle and scorpion.

(A warning, if you've never played the series: personas are summoned when a teen hero puts what looks like a pistol to their head and fires. Suicide is a theme throughout, and this happens in every fight.)

You can't climb the whole tower in one night. Make it too far and you will literally be blocked until the next full moon event. It's a ridiculously involved game, but my frustration in playing through it was never how long it took – it was not being able to do everything that I wanted to do, every day. That's a good thing.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A remake of the classic 2006 turn-based RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
Atlus

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-10920X, 128GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3080

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
persona.atlus.com/p3r

PIXELS COUNT

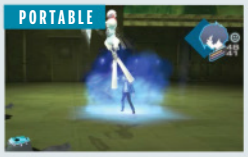
Persona 3 Portable vs Reload

SOCIAL

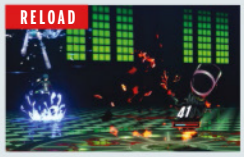
Conversations are two-dimensional, and scenes are empty backdrops.

Conversations are 3D, you're in the scene, and characters have full animation and voiceover.

COMBAT

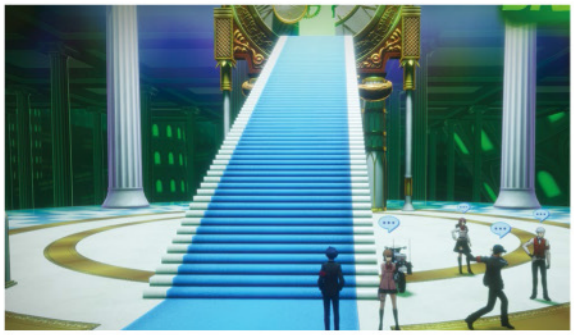


Shadow attacks and persona animations are simple, filling only some of the screen.



New animations showcase the personas, filling the screen with cool designs and effects.

Persona shows off distinctly snappy graphic design in one combat ending screen.



FAR LEFT: Students will give you gossip and opportunities to try new activities.

LEFT: The Chairman supervises your dorm, and is always ready to stun with a pun.

Summoning a new persona is a dramatic affair.

RIGHT: Your group prepares to go dungeon diving.

BELOW: How well you pay attention in class can earn you points in Academics.

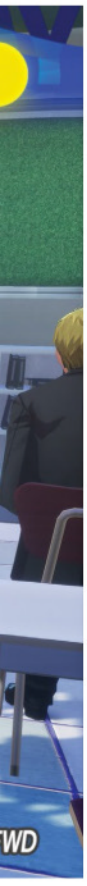
NEW LOOK

Obviously the game has been dramatically upscaled from last year's *Persona 3 Portable* PC port, which was fairly faithful to the original *Persona 3* and its simple graphics. But *Reload* is not just the same game with more pixels: it's been rebuilt in the Unreal Engine, and it's gorgeous.

The characters are 3D, fully present in social settings and able to move freely about the areas, but the lighting and shading remain painterly enough to maintain *Persona*'s unique design style. In the strip mall monorail stop, you'll see shadows moving across escalator stairs. Outside the school, you'll talk with your friends while cherry blossoms fall and swirl all around you.

In combat, it gets even better. The artists have taken the sharp *Persona* look and built on it, creating multi-panel graphic screens that evoke manga and mixing them beautifully with brand-new active animations for persona and enemy shadow abilities.

The way each persona emerges and fights – which changes from round to round, even when you're using the same abilities – is dramatic, screen-filling fun. Whether it's a valkyrie on horseback, a winged knight, a succubus in hotpants, or any of the other 173 combinations, each persona has its own style.



NEW SOUND

Much of *Persona 3*'s soundtrack has been remastered from scratch. The *Persona* composer departed Atlus in 2021, which may have contributed to that decision. While I liked these song vocals better than the originals, they're not as memorable as some other entries in the series (such as Gentle Madman from *Persona 5 Royal* is a favourite of mine).

Some of the most-haunting tunes play in the Velvet Room where you combine personas. They harken back to the original version of the game, with jazzy and mournful piano adding creepy ambiance.

What's better than the music is the voiceover audio. Every social link interaction has voiceover lines now, some of them extensive, in addition to the main plot. The voice acting is generally excellent.

Goofy Junpei, who could easily be 'that obnoxious JRPG guy' comes across as a surprisingly nuanced character, with insecurities and quirks, helped along by the skills of voice actor Zeno Robinson. If you don't want to listen to him, you can now use the Tab button functionality to toggle on super-speedy, automatic fast-forwarding through all interactions, but why would you when they're this fun?

The artists have taken the sharp Persona look and built on it

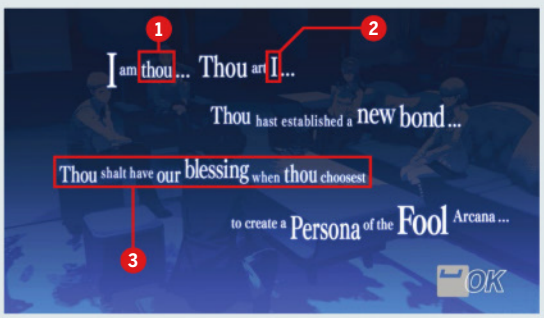
A VIEW QUIBBLES

UI improvements come thanks to the new game engine, since running up to things yourself is a much easier and more active way to interact than nudging a blue blob around on the screen as you did in the original. *Persona 3 Reload* flowed as smoothly as the Chairman's puns on my testing PC.

The controllable camera feels sluggish with a mouse and keyboard, however, requiring far too much mouse movement to see behind you. That's annoying when you have to shift directions in a dungeon, or when you need to use the right (and only the right) Ctrl button to attack. Unfortunately, controller players got the better end of the deal here; the PlayStation 5 version of the game has gorgeous camera control.

MEDIEVAL WORDCRAFT

Dear Atlus: here's how to use 'thou'



1 NO OBJECT This exchange happens every time you make a new social bond. "Thou" is a subject, not an object. This should be either "I am thee," or in archaic English, "I am you".

2 SO CLOSE "Thou art" is perfect. But again, "I" is not an object, even in medieval times. This should be "Thou art me". Yes, I know this exchange is a *Persona* tradition...

3 DEAD (HOUR) ON ...but the other 130 hours of the game sport nearly flawless English. This sentence nails "thou," plus two tough and different verb forms.

In combat, I really enjoyed the individual control of party members, particularly in combination with the One More mechanic. When you knock an enemy down (with, say, a persona attack that it is weak to), you have the option to strike again. You can choose to pass that turn to someone else in the party.

It's super fun to chain from a character that has a single-target strong electric attack to someone whose persona can then cast that type of move on the entire group of enemies, for example.

MODERN VALUES

Persona 3 Reload has made a few minor nods to contemporary sensibilities. A warning screen at the start of the game lets you know that you'll be seeing scenes of violence, bullying and self-harm. There is a minor in-passing question about why the evoker that is used to summon personas 'has to look like a gun'.

Very little else in the game's story has changed, which isn't for the better in all cases. Athletic club manager Yuko (she manages whatever team you join) carries on about having to pick up after her male charges and comments that at least it keeps her from gaining weight, and women not on the combat team are frequently portrayed as doe-eyed man-chasers or caregivers. Sometimes the core characters fall prey to sexist tropes.

But my biggest single complaint with *Persona 3 Reload* is one major missing feature from *Persona 3 Portable*: it is no longer possible to choose to play through as a female lead character. That's a shame, not just because you can't play as a girl, but also because the option gave *Portable* some serious replayability.

But in a game this huge and this rewarding, I'll let it slide. *Persona 3 Reload* is fabulous, engrossing, and ridiculously deep. If you've never played a *Persona*, this is a great introduction to the series, and holds its own against the newer games. If you've played it before, you're going to be shocked at how very reloaded the experience feels. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

***Persona 3 Reload* is a highly-polished remake of the 2006 classic. However, a few elements haven't aged well.**

89

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes

The stage is made up of floating islands. Scout out the strawberries, then go exploring.

PEAK PRACTICE

A modern platforming classic embraces 3D in CELESTE 64

What a joy it is to be back in *Celeste*'s world, with its distinctive colour palette and chiptunes to warm your bones on its snow-covered mountain. *Celeste 64* isn't a sequel, but a small game made in celebration of its sixth anniversary. Collect strawberries in an intricate platforming level, while suffering a heroic number of deaths. Same as it ever was, but with one key difference: it's now in 3D.

It's an alarming shift from the previous game, which is one of the most exquisite and precise 2D platformers yet made. When you failed to pass *Celeste*'s devious platforming challenges, you could only blame yourself. Likewise, when you succeeded, it was all down to you. It felt so good to jump and dash across its two-dimensional planes that the thought of bunging in one more dimension feels like heresy.

It's something worth exploring though, and why not experiment with a little, free game? So here's what *Celeste* looks like in three dimensions, in a one-level game whipped up in just a week.

I haven't played *Celeste* in ages, but it was barely any time before I was air-dashing and wall-climbing with the best of them. OK, not quite with the best of them – I'm far from a pro at precision-platformers – but Madeline's physics and move-set are comfortably familiar to her previous game. The major difference is that she can now hang onto walls indefinitely, taking the pressure off as you clamber round the 3D structures.

Madeline's physics and move set are comfortably familiar

One of the main benefits of a 3D world is all the new hiding places for collectibles, and the developer has found plenty of clever alcoves in which to stash those elusive strawberries. The exploration element is heightened in general, as you tilt the camera up to survey distant platforms and wonder 'how am I going to get up there?' The level isn't enormous, but large enough to last for multiple hours, depending on adept you are at clearing its platforming gauntlets.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 3D platformer that takes you back to *Celeste*'s snowy mountain

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Maddy Makes Games

PUBLISHER
Maddy Makes Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/Celeste64

INTO THE VOID

I did struggle at times, and for a reason common to many 3D platformers: depth perception. It can be difficult to judge the distance between platforms, even with the optional visual guide you can activate from the menu. I overcame this issue, when I could, by tilting the camera way up over Madeline's head, essentially turning a 3D platformer into a top-down one.

I don't know if I'm dying more here than in the original *Celeste*, but when I do I'm often swearing at the game, rather than myself. *Celeste 64* might be less precise than its predecessor, then – but for a free game whipped up in a week, I think we can lower the pitchforks. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

While it hasn't quite nailed 3D platforming, this still largely looks, feels and plays like the excellent *Celeste*.

76

BELOW: The gun has to be loaded, and unloaded, manually.

SHOE-IN

These boots are made for walking in NEURAL PARASITE

Before WASD and mouse-aiming became the norm, there were all sorts of crazy control schemes for first-person games, and in that light *Neural Parasite*'s isn't too bizarre. You move with your feet – by which I mean you click on a pair of on-screen feet, alternately, to make your character walk.

So that's left click to step forwards, or right click to step backwards, clicking the left shoe then the right, well, you get the idea. To turn around, you click the arrows at the edges of the screen – it's as if keyboards were never invented. I'm struggling to imagine a worse control scheme for a first-person shooter.

Luckily, *Neural Parasite* isn't an FPS. It's a first-person survival horror, a genre where control awkwardness isn't just expected, it's almost celebrated. When *Resident Evil* ditched its tank controls, a lot of the combat tension dissipated, as you could now literally run rings round the enemy. *Neural Parasite* goes the other way, presenting a control scheme so cumbersome that, at first, it seems an elaborate joke.

Waking up in a Nazi facility, you have to scour the gloomy halls for keys, knives and, ultimately, pistol ammo, as shuffling zombies emerge to have a munch on you. There'd be little tension if you could simply hold S to step backwards, but here you're frantically clicking the shoe icons – oh shit, I left-clicked when I meant to right-click. Great, that's me eaten.

The shooting is brilliantly tactile too, as you have to push out used bullets before you can insert fresh ones, then aim at the enemy's wobbling head in the dark.

75

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Jonathan Fasth	bit.ly/NeuralGame

SLUDGE LIFE

Less waste, more speed in platformer TOXIC TOMB

No one puts as much effort into a game's presentation as Locomalito, developer of sidescrolling shmup *Super Hydorah*, and other games with a distinctly arcade sensibility. These are new games that look like retro re-releases, complete with hi-res screen borders, CRT filters and even box art to print out at home.

That's not to say the attention to detail is lacking in-game, as these feel like games that could have been unearthed from a '90s time capsule. *Toxic Tomb* resembles a Master System game, with its looping, one-room stages and simple premise.

You play as a demon trying to save a power plant, by killing the ghouls that have set up shop in its reactors – er, forget what I just said about that simple premise. But it's just an excuse to fill stages with toxic blobs and generators – destroy all these and the stage's boss ghoul will be unleashed.

It's a hard game, with no difficulty concessions on that lavish game menu, but you can always dodge the spawning blobs if you're quick enough. Really you want to make a beeline for them, as chaining kills and star collectibles is the way to earn mega-points and extra lives.

It's an old-school sensibility, thankfully in a game with a modern obsession with precision. Moving, jumping and shooting feels snappy and responsive. My favourite touch is the automatic sword slash when you attack an enemy at close-range.

This sort of score-chasing platformer isn't my favourite, admittedly, but *Toxic Tomb* compares favourably with similar games like *Bubble Bobble* and the original *Mario Bros.* ■

78

BELOW: Want more points? Let the spawning blobs mass and harvest them.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Locomalito	bit.ly/ToxicTomb

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott

The absolute side-eye from Josephine here. Sophia Loren would be proud.

SKYHOLD PLEASE

Poetry and passing judgement in DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

Diving back into the lore-heavy opening of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* should be overwhelming. In the first few minutes, the game makes reference to mages, Templars, the Chantry, the Divine Justinia and more. It's easy to share the bewildered confusion of your character. And perhaps, more than this, it makes me realise that I was always fuzzy on the specifics of BioWare's grand, high fantasy world.

In this respect, the nine-year gap since release doesn't really make much difference. I had, apparently, forgotten everything about Thedas anyway. This, in some ways, is a positive; there's a sense that these byzantine, arcane institutions have existed for millennia, long before I ever started making informed beard selections in the *Inquisition* character creator. The fact that the specifics are lost on me is actually pretty realistic, in the same way I'd struggle to explain the difference between Christian denominations in a manner beyond 'Catholics have fancier robes'. In *Dragon Age*, it's enough just to know that certain factions are at war. And, unfortunately, that any hope for peace turns to explosive shit in the first minute of the game.

CHANTRY ESSENTIALS

Another thing that *Dragon Age* does well is an essential part of all good fantasy. Many of the characters here feel tropey to begin with: oversexed barbarian, an overzealous crusader, overbearing mage. But, in practice they all have their depths. *Inquisition* is at its best when it embraces these moments, especially when it comes to the interpersonal stuff. Sometimes this comes out in conversations, as you wander around Skyhold looking for someone with fresh conversation options, but the depth of the writing shows when you form proper connections with your companions.

Many of the characters here feel tropey to begin with

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An MMO, but offline and the rest of your party are actually worth conversing with

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Bioware

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
Online co-op

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/1222690/Dragon_Age_Inquisition

I decide to pursue a romance with Cassandra. She, as a devout member of Chantry, is understandably upset at the centre of her religious life being blown to pieces. The thought of winning her back around is just too tempting for an inveterate people-pleaser. Taking this to its romantic end leads to some amazing moments. On the surface, Cassandra is all scar tissue and divine purpose. But once you start to romance her, she reveals her gooey interior, like a Cadbury's Creme Egg in a steel cuirass. Before long, you're reading her poetry in a petal-scattered glade. It sounds cringey – and in lesser hands it would be – but BioWare shows it for what it is: the bravery of a 'tough' person finally revealing her sensitive side. It might, admittedly, be more effective if my character didn't look like a squashed Father Christmas, but even my careless character creation can't diminish these moments. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Epic in sweep and scale, but best at small, personal stories, *Inquisition* is the most consistent *Dragon Age*.

89

BELOW: "Nun shall pass! Wait, why is your hammer glowing?"

SIGMAR-A-LAGO

A city break inside MORDHEIM: CITY OF THE DAMNED

The Warhammer Fantasy world is a wretched place to live. Beastmen in the forests. Trolls in the rivers. Giant rats beneath you. And, if Mordheim is anything to go by, flaming comets in the skies above. Worse still, if you survive the impact event, roaming mercenaries or deranged cultists will probably finish you off.

That's the setup for this PC adaptation of Games Workshop's cult tabletop game. In some ways, *Mordheim* is the raucous city break of the Warhammer world. But instead of cologne-drenched white orcs on a stag weekend in Budapest, this features devout Sigmarite warrior priestesses and skittering bands of skaven on the hunt for precious wyrdstone. You start off with a weakling bunch of pre-grizzled adventurers, who gradually become more capable as they brave the city's cursed streets. Because, as everyone knows, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Apart from Nurgle's Rot and being smashed in the clavicle with a mace. It feels like a direct translation of the board game: traversing the world and performing attacks has a turn-based, randomised element, which makes it a staccato affair. This takes some of the edge off the combat, especially when feeble rat-men start shaking off multiple attacks that should be cleaving them in two. It's also tough. Even the most basic foes take some punishment, and navigating *Mordheim*'s tumbling streets can be a challenge. It's not helped by some dense, unintuitive tutorials that make a complex job explaining systems that should be simple. There are some compelling elements though. ■

68

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
£18	Rogue Factor	Nacon

KRULL

Multiplayer action in CASTLE CRASHERS

Last this month is *Castle Crashers*, a game that sounds like a mediaeval reality TV pitch, looks like a banned cartoon Network show, and plays like a night terror after watching Krull too many times. Which, as it happens, was the inspiration for this month's They're Back.

You could take away all the game's flourishes and it would still basically be brilliant: a fast, chaotic, multiplayer action game that feels lovely to play. Enemies are numerous and varied. Weapons have a satisfying 'thwomp'. But everything here is layered with the kind of mad creativity that's almost humiliating for other games. That cool idea you had for an industrialised medieval stronghold? That's a throwaway design in level 19. Your boss is a weird giant river cat? Cool. *Castle Crashers* already did it. You want a stage based on a cursed, weaponised version of Microsoft Paint? Please. That's so crushingly unoriginal. It's so densely inventive that going back to it is something of a shock. My memory is fuzzy: I recall a straightforward side-scrolling brawler with lovely cartoon graphics. The game I always wanted *Golden Axe* to be. But, somehow, I managed to forget about white water rafting levels, shitting deer, haunted laboratories, crashed alien spacecraft, and a corn-on-the-cob that makes me dread trips to the vegetable aisle. It holds up surprisingly well, too. Find three friends who've never played it before, and half of your enjoyment will come from seeing their shocked faces, like those YouTube videos where people pretend to watch Raiders of the Lost Ark for the first time. ■

85

BELOW: *Castle Crashers* has big bosses.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
£10	The Behemoth	The Behemoth

Unveiling the Arcane Clash: The Legendary Mages Set to Debut Dragonheir's Multiverse Through Phase Two Collaborative Adventure with

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

In the immersive story-telling between Dragon-heir: Silent Gods and DUNGEONS & DRAGONS , the legendary ranger Drizzt Do'Urden successfully thwarted his nemesis, Errtu the Balor, in the first phase of the storyline. As the adventure moves into its second phase, two arcane masters from DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, Elminster Aumar and Sammaster, will make their debut on February 23rd, offering players an exciting showdown.

An exclusive Storyline with Elminster Aumar and Sammaster In the storyline of this collaborative adventure, Dragonheir's multiverse welcomes the arrival of Elminster Aumar and Sammaster, two esteemed masters of the magic arts.
In the original lore, Sammaster once studied magic under Elminster Aumar. However, after a heated argument, Sammaster's irrationality led him to redirect his dissatisfaction towards Elminster's existence, fueling his resentment. This diver gence pushed him away from the path of righteousness, delving into necromantic arts, ultimately opposing Elminster Aumar. Within Dragonheir, players will accompany Elminster Aumar to thwart the collaborative boss Sammaster from encroaching upon the world of Dragonheir.

Dragonheir: Silent Gods' collaboration with DUNGEONS & DRAGONS is now available to play on Mac, Windows, Epic, Steam, iOS and Android platforms. Join DUNGEONS & DRAGONS Legends in Dragonheir and engage with their community on Facebook, YouTube and Discord for comprehensive information.

HARDWARE

...IES DESERVE

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GROUP TEST

RTX 40-SERIES SUPER GPUs

Here's how super-duper variants of Ada Lovelace graphics cards stack up.

By Jacob Ridley

Three new graphics cards in the same month – what a super way to kick off spring. These three new 'Super' graphics cards are a chance for the green team to tinker with core counts, buses and budgets to appeal to our PC gaming sensibilities, and I'm pleased to say this lot are a lot more appealing than the last.

Each Super graphics card carries more cores than the non-Super variant of the same name, and that's about the extent of the improvements for the RTX 4070 Super. However, the RTX 4070 Ti Super comes with an entirely different GPU to the RTX 4070 Ti.

RTX 4080

NVIDIA **£1,139**

Much maligned

1 The RTX 4080 was launched in November, 2022 and for most of the time since I, and many others, have been hoping for a price drop. Discounts have been few and far between, however, with often a four-digit sum required to take one of these chunky cards home. Now, if by some stroke of luck you were able to buy this card for less than the regular asking price, you'd receive something particularly powerful. On paper, the RTX 4080 is closely matched to the RTX 3080 Ti from last generation. However, if you pit one against the other in gaming benchmarks, there's only one winner. The RTX 4080 is absolutely dominant. So, what's the big issue? That would be the card's positioning. Nvidia has asked a high fee for this card and the absolute daddy of graphics cards, the RTX 4090, was tantalisingly within reach. There's no comparison between the RTX 4080 and RTX 4090 – the latter is in a league of its own. When spending upwards of four figures on a graphics card, it's the RTX 4090 that everyone wants. As a result, the RTX 4080 often felt most in need of a rebalance.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Overpriced
- Huge
- Solid at 4K

SPECS CUDA CORES: 9,728 / **MEMORY:** 16GB GDDR6X / **BUS:** 256-BIT / **TGP:** 320W / **GPU:** AD103

RTX 4080 Super

NVIDIA **£959**

More for less

2 The RTX 4080 Super addresses our key concerns with the RTX 4080. The high price has been rectified, replaced by a new £959 tag. There's more GPU for the money, too, with the Super version delivering the full AD103 GPU with higher core counts across CUDA, Tensor, and RT cores. There has also been a minor tweak to the memory speed, from 22.4Gbps to 23Gbps. These changes to the GPU and memory make little difference to the overall performance of this card. The RTX 4080 Super would occasionally lead the RTX 4080 in benchmarking by a handful of frames, though other times would simply match it. I don't mind that, however, thanks to the price cut. The RTX 4080 Super does feel like a tacit admission by Nvidia that it may have over-reached on the pricing of the original RTX 4080. To launch a new version of the same card for £200 less doesn't scream confidence in the card's ability to sell-through stock. Similarly it's the only Super card to launch cheaper than the existing non-Super card.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Price drop
- Still huge
- RTX 4080 performance

SPECS CUDA CORES: 10,240 / **MEMORY:** 16GB GDDR6X / **BUS:** 256-BIT / **TGP:** 320W / **GPU:** AD103

2
RTX 4080 SUPER
GEFORCE RTX
THERE HAS BEEN A MINOR TWEAK TO THE MEMORY SPEED

THE CARD'S SLIM MEMORY BUS AND CAPACITY ARE TOUGH SELLS

RTX 4070 Ti

NVIDIA £769

Memory troubles

3 The RTX 4070 Ti appeared headed for disaster at one point – it was originally announced as the RTX 4080 12GB with an £899 price tag. Nvidia saw sense ahead of the card's release, however, and 'unlaunched' it. The company then reformulated that card into the RTX 4070 Ti before us today. During our runs we saw the RTX 4070 Ti often trouncing the RTX 3090, which is no easy feat, and as such it became a natural fit for any 4K gaming PC with a reasonable budget. With upscaling and frame generation technologies in tow it can make an impact even with every graphical preset cranked up to 11, too. However, the card's slim memory bus and capacity are tough sells. The RTX 4070 Ti struggles even more pitted against the new and improved RTX 4070 Super. With a much lower price tag and performance that's often within 10% of the Ti, you're better off ignoring the older card and searching out the Super instead. That shouldn't pose any sort of problem – the RTX 4070 Ti won't be around for long as it's been replaced by the RTX 4070 Ti Super.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Weak memory
- Too expensive
- Great 4K performance

SPECS **CUDA CORES:** 7,680 / **MEMORY:** 12GB GDDR6X / **BUS:** 192-BIT / **TGP:** 285W / **GPU:** AD104

RTX 4070 Ti Super

NVIDIA £769

Problem solved

4 With an entirely different GPU stuffed inside it, the RTX 4070 Ti is a big departure from the card it replaces. Where the RTX 4070 Ti uses a bigger version of the RTX 4070 chip, the Super uses a cut-down RTX 4080 GPU, and that affords it a few more luxuries the standard Ti could only dream of. The main improvement with the Super being the larger memory bus it offers at 256-bit. This is host to 16GB of GDDR6X memory – a whole 4GB more than you'll find on the standard Ti. The overall benefit of this improvement is felt more in some games, less in others. It depends how much memory matters for that specific game. Of course, 4K tends to use more memory, and the Super should and often does come out on top at this resolution most of all. The Super is not as pronounced a step up over its predecessor as you might expect, however. That's likely down to the similarities in core counts across the two cards. The Super comes with 768 CUDA cores more than the non-Super, spread across six extra SMs. A slim upgrade, really.

PC GAMER VERDICT

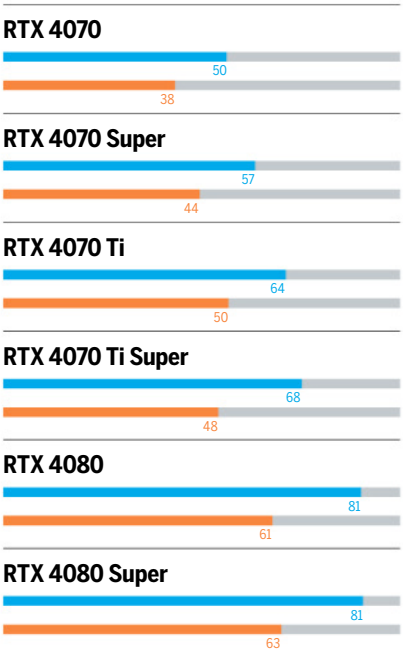
- Proper memory system
- Slim core upgrade
- Good efficiency

SPECS **CUDA CORES:** 8,448 / **MEMORY:** 16GB GDDR6X / **BUS:** 256-BIT / **TGP:** 285W / **GPU:** AD103

BENCHMARKS

Metro Exodus Enhanced Edition
DX12, Ultra, 4K

Average Minimum (fps – higher is better)



RTX 4070

NVIDIA £529

Price drop

5 You're looking at a more affordable graphics card in the RTX 4070, at least compared to the other cards included in this test. It's come down in price further since the release of the RTX 4070 Super, but we'll get onto that card shortly. For now, let's focus on whether the RTX 4070 is worth picking up, as this card continues to be made alongside the Super.

We've described the RTX 4070 as "an RTX 3080 with benefits" and that's still true today. It's generally faster, has access to more memory, and is massively more power efficient. Using newer manufacturing technologies through all of the RTX 40-series, Nvidia has managed to stuff a lot more transistors into a tiny, more efficient GPU. The RTX 4070 is prime example of that process.

The difficulty for Nvidia hit once AMD released the RX 7800 XT. This card offered mostly similar performance in rasterised games, a little less in ray-traced ones, but for a significant saving. The recent price drop from Nvidia helps keep this card in the game and competitive with AMD's options.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Solid performance
- Cool
- Quiet

SPECS CUDA CORES: 5,888 / **MEMORY:** 12GB GDDR6X / **BUS:** 192-BIT / **TGP:** 200W / **GPU:** AD104

RTX 4070 Super

NVIDIA £579

Best of the bunch

6 The RTX 4070 Super is an all-round improvement on the RTX 4070. It delivers much the same power-savvy performance as its namesake for the same price asked for it at launch. That sort of mid-generation improvement makes it an easy recommendation to make for most PC gamers.

The RTX 4070 Super comes with a heap more cores than the standard model – 7,168 to 5,888 – but sticks with the same memory configuration at 12GB of GDDR6X. What's important to note is that this core bump puts the Super card pretty close to the outgoing RTX 4070 Ti. The Ti had extended a comfy lead over the original RTX 4070 with its 7,680 CUDA cores but that lead has shrunk significantly between it and the Super.

The RTX 4070 Super is arguably the best of the Super bunch. It's the sort of more-for-your-money card we'd hoped to see out of a mid-generation Ada Lovelace refresh. This will be the card to look out for in the coming months, though I wouldn't pass up an original RTX 4070 for under £500.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Good value
- Decent core bump
- Efficient

SPECS CUDA CORES: 7,168 / **MEMORY:** 12GB GDDR6X / **BUS:** 192-BIT / **TGP:** 220W / **GPU:** AD104

The future of graphics processing probably lies offline, in data centres.

GOING DEEPER

DLSS is getting smarter – what does that mean for local computational power?

It's been around for long enough now that we take it for granted. A new game comes out, dripping in graphics, and occasionally when we run it at 4K it dips to an unplayable 58fps. So we go into the video options, turn the 'DLSS' option on, and get back on with walking through neon-lit streets in our game du jour.

But DLSS is worth paying closer attention to. This tech is indistinguishable from magic. It's upscaling our games in real time, at the point that the frame is being rendered by the GPU. It's able not just to take a 1080p image and produce a very convincing 4K version that doesn't eat up resources, but also to interpolate between rendered frames for a smoother visual experience and a higher overall framerate. Without it, developers wouldn't be able to push ray tracing as far, or Unreal Engine 5's impressive features like Nanite and Lumen. And its pace of evolution is fearsome.

Since its earliest implementations in *Battlefield V* and *Metro Exodus* in 2019 as DLSS 1.0, it's had quite the glow up. The benefits weren't that obvious then – it had to be trained per game, loading up countless frames in a supercomputer and learning what each frame should look like at a higher resolution. The results had artefacts in them and the performance boost was modest. There was no control over how much DLSS you were applying, just an on/off toggle.

DLSS unofficially updated to a 1.9 release a few months later in August 2019, and by the time Remedy's utterly superlative *Control* came out (go and play *Control* immediately) it had been adapted to make use of the CUDA cores on Geforce RTX 2000 architecture instead of just the dedicated Tensor cores which take information from the Nvidia deep-learning supercomputer and interpret it.

DLSS 2.0 followed in April 2020, and this time the big progress was a form of TAAU that had been trained generically rather than per-game. In other words, DLSS 2.0 knew how to smooth out any and all jaggies in any image. It didn't need the supercomputer to study a specific game over trillions of frames first. What it meant for us on ground level was fewer artefacts, noticeably better fidelity and more granularity over how we applied it in our games.

LEFT OUT IN THE COLD

In 2022 we saw version 3.0, and a year after we were treated to 3.5. With the not insignificant caveat that older RTX cards were left out in the cold and only the insanely pricy RTX 4000 boards received the new goodies, this is where DLSS started to get properly exciting. Also a bit spooky. It wasn't just upscaling frames any more, or doing anti-aliasing grunt work, but generating extra frames, seemingly for free, without anything like the same hit to fidelity that previous versions created. DLSS 3.0 introduced optical flow interpolation, a

Red alert

What's AMD's response to all this? In a characteristic mode from team red, they released an open-source, GPU-agnostic alternative to DLSS called FidelityFX Super Resolution, part of a wider open-source suite called GPUOpen. How does it stack up against its great rival? Pretty favourably, actually. It won a lot of good will by making itself available to both Nvidia and AMD users, and while the image quality of upscaled frames is perhaps slightly less sharp in most games than Nvidia's offering, it's close.

WHERE WERE YOU? *Four games from yesteryear that needed DLSS*

CRYSIS
Imagine pressing a button in the graphics options and watching your framerate double. We'd have been able to play it.

BOILING POINT
The thing is, it wasn't that bad. The pioneering shooter might actually have been playable, with AI's help.

GEOFF CRAMMOND'S GRAND PRIX 3
Trying to gain the upper hand over messrs Schumacher, Hakkinenn and Villeneuve at 10fps was not easy.

METRO 2033
2010's finest barely playable tech demo. The shooting was really meaty too, not that you could ever enjoy it at the time.

technique that takes two rendered frames from the pipeline, interpolates the differences between them, then renders more frames in the middle. That's how it's able to send your FPS skyrocketing like a dodgy cryptocurrency.

Version 3.5's advances target ray tracing, and uses five times more training data than DLSS 3.0 to achieve a denoising effect on ray-traced images via ray reconstruction. It's a significant cog in the engine of algorithms that makes path-tracing possible in *Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty*. And when you look at the forgettable effect it had on the way *Battlefield V* looked and place that next to *Phantom Liberty* five years later, you see what a big deal DLSS has been. For Nvidia, for the game industry, and for everyone with an Nvidia GPU.

Because during a five-year period characterised by semiconductor shortages, poor die yields and a constant struggle to achieve more computational power through die shrinks, it's been this largely offline, deep learning AI-based process where we've seen the great leaps forwards.

It's a bit trite to say that AI's the future at this point. AI was the future in 2021. Today, we're already bored of hearing about all the ways it's changing every molecule of our familiar lives. With that said – the fact that DLSS has achieved what it has paints a curious picture of the future for PC graphics. What's the point of buying these expensive slabs of silicon if they're increasingly going to be used simply to interpret the work a supercomputer did somewhere in a data centre?

And AI already has the answer to this: it's designing the next generations of graphics cards. Nvidia's chief scientist and senior vice president of research Bill Dally explained in 2022 that the company is using AI to optimise new RTX cards, including streamlining processes and improving energy efficiency. So AI's building better cards that will use AI to render stuff for you.

AI'S BUILDING BETTER CARDS THAT WILL USE AI TO RENDER STUFF FOR YOU

Ultimately software can't replace hardware. However smart the deep learning supercomputers are, we'll need something that deciphers the huge amount of information they provide. That's why DLSS isn't a system-wide technique.

So AI won't replace graphics cards. But it's already changed how they're designed, and what their purpose actually is. No longer an engine room of local rendering, modern GPUs are part of a pipeline that relies increasingly in offline rendering work, to deliver eerily detailed frames to our monitors at speeds that simply haven't been possible by local rendering. Now if only it could draw hands properly... ■

Phil Iwaniuk

TOP LEFT: Nvidia's migrated anti-aliasing to AI too, as of DLSS 2.0.

TOP: The supercomputers where DLSS is trained. Secret agents hiding nearby, presumably.

ALL RISE

Is a sit-stand gaming setup worth it in 2024?

We did a lot of things differently during lockdown. Our bins went out more than we did. Socialising meant pub quizzes on Zoom. Going for a 35-minute walk was an act of reckless abandon worthy of police intervention, flour was harder to come by than depleted uranium, and we all got very into our home working setups.

Did you experiment with a standing desk in 2020? No, come on. There's no shame in it. It was a different time. And anyway, I did. Terrified by the thought that my already sedentary lifestyle would be disrupted by a government-mandated period of remaining indoors and gleaning my only exercise by banging a pan outside my front door every Thursday night, I panic-bought (among other crippling and regrettable expenses including a vast double freezer) a standing desk.

This desk, I reasoned, would save me. It would be my ally in the fight against obesity, diabetes, circulatory problems, cancer, cardiovascular disease and premature death. It would do these things, because I'd Googled 'standing desk health benefits' and the article at SERP zero had listed those exact bullet points. That information still circulates freely, much like COVID-19 itself, to this day. But it perhaps isn't interrogated very robustly. I certainly didn't think to do so. I just got the screwdriver out, assembled my new sit-stand desk, and waited for Ryan Gosling's body to emerge from within my own.

In fact, the research around standing desk use isn't very clear. What we do know is that sitting at a desk burns, on average, 80 calories an hour. There are huge variances depending on your height, weight, gender and metabolism, but that's the ball park. The good news is that when you stand at a desk instead, you burn more calories – 88 of them an hour. Count 'em.

That's the equivalent of about 50g of cucumber, or one minute of push ups. To put it another way, you could continue using a sitting desk over an eight-hour working day, expend 64 calories fewer than if you were standing, and then offset it by eating the equivalent of a cup of raspberries less, or do about 15 minutes of yoga, and achieve the same results. In other words: standing is not going to get anybody ripped.

IMPOSSIBLE TO JUDGE

I didn't know this in 2020. It was especially hard to measure for me because like many lockdown-ites I became absolutely obsessed with being outdoors and exercising at any possible juncture. I began every day with a 5K run on the roof of my apartment block, which fortuitously had a running track. I stretched the definition of leaving the house once per day for exercise so far that it included eight-hour walks, the like of which a Sunday evening BBC2 producer would lick their lips over. It was, then, impossible to judge or isolate the benefits of standing.

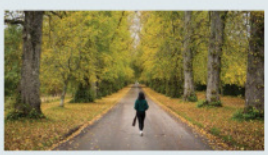
I WAITED FOR RYAN GOSLING'S BODY TO EMERGE FROM WITHIN MY OWN

And so it proves with big data too. A 2016 report from Harvard Medical School pointed out that studies into sitting at work versus not sitting aren't precise enough to be helpful here. "But 'not sitting' can mean many different things," says the report. "Walking, pacing, or just standing – and as the new study on energy expenditure shows, the health effects of these may not be the same. For most of these potential benefits, rigorous studies of standing desks have not yet been performed. So, the real health impact of a standing desk is not certain."

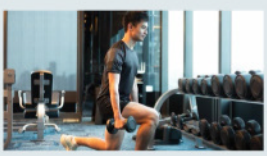
Check and mate, standing desks. However, there are other potential benefits to a sit-stand setup that don't sound as transformative but might offer a lot of value in the long run. The first is postural – it's easier to maintain a straight back and shoulders when you're standing than sitting. It doesn't happen by default, though – you need to actively maintain good posture when you're standing. It's just that your body

PHIL IWANIUK
Rigid rule-adherer Phil Iwaniuk is only joking about those eight-hour lockdown walks. Please don't come and arrest him, we need his words every month.

STANDING ORDER *Four ways to burn more calories than standing at a desk*

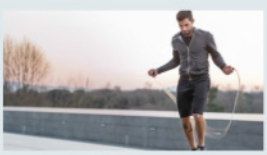


FIFTEEN MINUTES OF SLOW WALKING
63 CALORIES
In the time if takes to stroll down to the Co-Op and back, you've burned as many calories than a full day of standing.



SEVEN MINUTES OF RESISTANCE TRAINING
56 CALORIES
More plates, more dates. Suns out, guns out. All these rhymes will suddenly seem hilarious to you when you start lifting.

TEN MINUTES' ROWING
68 CALORIES
Nobody likes rowing, even Sir Steven Redgrave probably had mornings when he didn't fancy it. But it involves a lot of muscles and it's good for heart health.



THREE MINUTES' SKIPPING
68 CALORIES
Or 'jumping rope' if the word 'skipping' feels a bit too friendly and comfortable for what's actually one of the most efficient calorie-burning exercises possible.

position's helping you to do it. Some people report that tasks requiring fine motor skills are easier to perform when standing than sitting.

Hang on – does this mean I'll be better at *CS2* if I'm standing? Years after I gave up on standing as my default working position at my desk, I tried gaming while standing instead. The results as far as K:D weren't particularly illuminating, but I did find that I felt more alert throughout the game than I usually do while I'm sitting.

And that married up with the only major benefit I found to working while standing – alertness. Even though I'd run 5K before starting work, I felt more awake and responsive to work stimuli when I was standing up. Of course, the overwhelming anxiety of daily death counts, state-imposed house arrest and absolutely nobody venturing that we'd ever, at any point in the future, ever return back to normality may have played a part in this.

But we did return to normality, and a lot of us sat back down. The great standing experiment no longer feels in fashion, but the benefits – though exaggerated – may be worth it. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: Sit-stand desks give you plenty of flexibility – but do they actually promote good health?

BELOW: Playing while standing upright might help alertness. For some players, that's a done deal.

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget

KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

TOTAL
£1,050

MOTHERBOARD		**B660M Pro RS** ASRock **£112** This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		**Core i5 13400F** Intel **£199** Intel's added four more cores to its entry-level Core i5 and it's become even more fantastic value.
GRAPHICS CARD		**GeForce RTX 4060** Nvidia **£290** One of the cheaper ways to score Nvidia's latest gaming architecture and DLSS 3 support.
COOLER		**Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)** Intel **Free** There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		**T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB** Teamgroup **£40** Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200.
POWER SUPPLY		**Pure Power 12 M 550W** Be Quiet! **£91** We have to run a 550W PSU for the RTX 4060, as per Nvidia's recommendations.
SSD		**WD Black SN770 500GB** Western Digital **£41** It's finally time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive even in a budget machine such as this.
HDD		**WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm** Western Digital **£38** You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash (we don't budget it), but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		**Zauron** Aerocool **£32** This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		**Mobiuz EX240** BenQ **£132** You can get an excellent gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays, and this BenQ is our favourite on a budget.
KEYBOARD		**KM250 RGB** G.Skill **£49** It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: A hot-swappable mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		**G203** Logitech **£24** A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips.
HEADSET		**HS55 Stereo** Corsair **£40** Corsair's budget cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

TOTAL
£1,553

MOTHERBOARD		**B660M Mortar WiFi** MSI **£177** This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		**Core i5 13400F** Intel **£199** Yes, this is the same CPU as the budget build. It's simply too good value to miss and perfect for high fps gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		**RX 7700 XT** AMD **£430** If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card.
COOLER		**Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)** Intel **Free** Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 13th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while
MEMORY		**Vengeance LPX 16GB DDR4-3200** Corsair **£36** With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		**Pure Power 12 M 650W** Be Quiet! **£107** This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with modern PCIe 5.0 connectivity.
SSD		**WD Black SN770 1TB** Western Digital **£63** There are faster PCIe 4.0 drives, but this is the best value for money SSD around.
HDD		**WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm** Western Digital **£38** Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary or in the costing, but it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		**H7** NZXT **£100** It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		**S2722DGM** Dell **£260** With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.
KEYBOARD		**KM250 RGB** GO.Skill **£49** You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		**DeathAdder V2** Razer **£47** Tried and tested, this Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		**Blackshark V2** Razer **£85** The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

TOTAL

£5,393

MOTHERBOARD		**MEG X670E Ace** MSI £715 There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.
PROCESSOR		**Ryzen 9 7950X3D** AMD £669 AMD's 3D stacked chips are awesome for gaming, thanks to heaps of cache. This Ryzen 9 is the best of the bunch
GRAPHICS CARD		**GeForce RTX 4090** Nvidia £1,500 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.
COOLER		**Kraken X63** NZXT £155 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, though you'll have to request an AM5 bracket for AMD compatibility.
MEMORY		**Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB)** G.Skill £118 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		**Prime TX-1000** Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		**WD Black SN850X 2TB** Western Digital £110 You could drop in a PCIe 5.0 SSD into this build, but it's even too overkill for us right now. The SN850X is a superb PCIe 4.0 drive.
DATA DRIVE		**NM790 4TB** Lexar £189 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
CASE		**5000D** Corsair £140 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		**34 QD-OLED (AW3423DWF)** Alienware £929 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		**ROG Azoth** Asus £250 This keyboard's secret? Lubed switches. Don't knock it until you've tried it. It's also wireless and very well made.
MOUSE		**G502 Lightspeed** Logitech £120 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		**Arctis 7 Wireless** SteelSeries £158 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

"It probably sounds like madness playing this in bed on my Steam Deck"

A masochist returns to NIOH 2 yet again

Since it launched on PC back in early 2021, I have made a few valiant attempts to get stuck into *Nioh 2*, each of them ending in the same way: exasperation and failure. And here I am trying very hard to git gud.

FRASER BROWN

THIS MONTH
Dying from the comfort of my bed.

ALSO PLAYED
Marvel's Spider-Man 2, *dotAge*

Endurance rather than skill is what gets me through soulslikes. My reflexes are sluggish at best, and anyone who's ever fought me in *Mortal Kombat* knows that I quickly forget about the existence of a block button. That's why I usually go for a build that can take a beating, or in the case of *Elden Ring*, a magic build that can demolish foes with meteors. But mostly I just smash my head against the wall until the credits roll.

Nioh 2, though, as well as being a punishing game, also has a mechanical complexity that demands an alertness and dexterity that simply exhausts me. Thus, I've been unable to power through.

So why am I trying again? Well, you can turn into a big ol' demon, for one, transforming you into a boss-killing monster. It's not often that soulslikes let you feel this powerful, even if it is just temporary. It's also flashy. It's got style for days, ensuring that you look like a badass even if you're mere seconds away from getting utterly squashed.

This time, I'm hoping very large weapons will be a winning strategy.

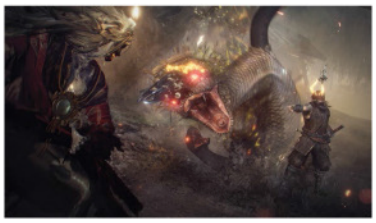
TOP: Meet my angry birds.

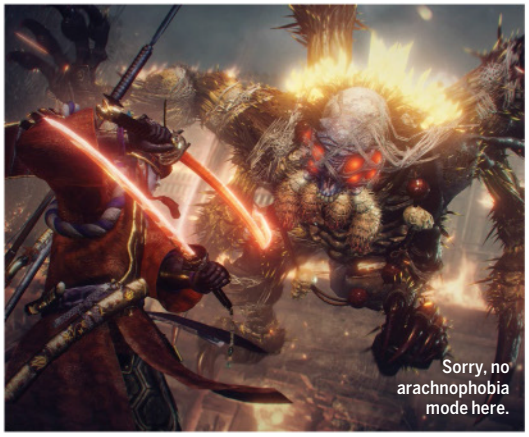
Nioh 2 lets you carry two melee weapons at once, along with a bow, and I've picked the odachi and the axe. I hit hard, but I'm also very slow and get extremely tired after a couple of attacks. I love my human-sized killing tools, though, so I'll persevere.

NIOH TO DEATH

Despite a shared philosophy with FromSoftware's games, *Nioh 2* also charts its own course, doling out battles that feel distinct from other soulslikes. It's gruelling, yes, but there's even more satisfaction in winning a fight, as the effort demanded is just so much greater.

THE GAME'S MASSIVE, SURE, BUT FEELS SO MUCH MORE MANAGEABLE





Sorry, no arachnophobia mode here.

When you find the right rhythm, blocking, dodging, breaking an enemy's posture, briefly transforming into a yokai, switching stances on the fly, perfectly timing your ki pulse to regain stamina, it's like nailing the world's most complicated dance moves. I usually need to take a breather after defeating a boss, waiting for my hands to stop shaking.

Given all of this, it probably sounds like madness playing this in bed on my Steam Deck, but that's become part of my nightly routine this time around. Sitting at my desk seems to just make me more tense, but when I'm sinking into my mattress, it's much easier to shrug off the potential stress.

This has also forced me to play in small bites before I call it a night, stopping the experience from becoming a frustrating slog. *Nioh 2*'s structure also helps me avoid all-nighters. Unlike most soulslikes, it's segmented into largely linear missions. The game's massive, sure, but feels so much more manageable.

Will I finish it this time, let alone make it to NG+ ? Honestly, there's a better than good chance that I will give up once again. But it hasn't happened yet. So you never know – this might be the one. ■

"I'll see you in hell."

"I plunge my blade into his heart"

Succumbing to bloodlust in DISHONORED 2

ROBERT JONES

THIS MONTH
Failed a *Dishonored 2* pacifist run with gusto.

ALSO PLAYED
Hotline Miami, Pacific Drive

I feel the rage rise within my body, my sensations heightened, my palms sweaty. These mangy curs are not going to take me down and, even if they do, I'm taking them into the darkness of the Void with me.

I unleash a bolt from my crossbow into the belly of a guard trying to kill me, one who is milliseconds away from pulling the trigger of his pistol. The fleshy thud forces him to bend double, wincing in agony, but it's not that which kills him, it's my razor-sharp Folding Blade which, as I force the crumpling guard to his knees by crushing his right leg with my boot, takes his head clean off in a single stroke, his goggling eyes momentarily blinking at me in disbelief.

Blood sprays over the floor and wall as, under fire now from the dead guard's accomplice, adrenaline courses through my veins. The guard catches me with a round, though, and my vision judders, my consciousness slipping. Facing doom, I summon my dark gifts, as bestowed by the mysterious otherworldly character of The Outsider, and grab my assailant around the neck with a billowing mass of Void shadow. Dragging him across the filthy cobblestones by the neck, I slam him into a wall and then, as he scrambles to his feet, a look of terror on his face, I plunge my blade into his heart. I'll see you in hell.

BLADE OF DOOM

Plenty of games pit you against hordes of foes who are looking to kill you, but there's something about the *Dishonored* series that takes fighting back to a more visceral, engaging level. I think a large part of it comes down to the game's story pitch, which is that you yourself have been wrongfully accused of crimes, dishonoured and subjected to a stripping of reputation as well as humanity. You've had your way of life forcibly taken from you and, now, on top of that, you've got people trying to actually end your life. It's the injustice of it all, I think, that burns most. And *Dishonored 2*, like its excellent predecessor, uniquely seems to beg the question, what would you do in the same situation and, even more critically, what lengths would you go to in order to survive? ■

"Clearly having the best superhero studio on the planet wasn't enough"

I really wanted to like SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE, alas...

After 15 hours with *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League*, I rolled credits. And in many ways, I regret those hours. By now there's a good chance you will have heard about the polarising reception to the new third-person action-adventure shooter, where Harley Quinn, Deadshot, Captain Boomerang and King Shark go head-to-head with Superman, Batman and co.

As someone who is increasingly trying to spend less time online, it's been a little difficult to not get sucked into the 'dead on arrival' narrative that has plagued the game months before release, yet I went in hopeful.

This is Rocksteady after all – the studio that brought superhero games into the 21st century. And the *Batman Arkham* games have stood the test of time. Seriously! Check out *Arkham Knight*. It's gorgeous! There has to be some good stuff here, right?

During my first few hours, I found *Suicide Squad* enjoyable. Like a 7/10 that comes with mindless gameplay but offers a decent hook to keep you going. Here that hook is the story and characters. It sports some fun comedy and engaging writing when it comes to the four main leads, each taking jibes at one another while surveying the Hall of Justice or failing upwards across the open world city of Metropolis.

Later, a Batman Museum treats players to the happenings of the Dark Knight's past adventures on top of filling in the blanks between the last game and now. Boss battles have their moments too, even if they all surround shooting and nothing else. I mean, who doesn't like the idea of fighting a skyscraper-sized Green Lantern who constantly conjures up an arsenal of giant glowing green weapons?

MATT POSKITT

THIS MONTH
Falling in and out of love with Task Force X.

ALSO PLAYED
Final Final VII Remake Integrade, Parcel Corps

WHO DOESN'T LIKE THE IDEA OF FIGHTING A SKYSCRAPER-SIZED GREEN LANTERN?

HOLY CASH COW!

The problem is that general combat mostly surrounds fighting a bunch of purple-glowing aliens while being encumbered by what feels like an ever-increasing number of currencies and a never-ending tutorial. We get it, Warner Bros! You want your own *Fortnite*. A never-ending cash cow to print money (I give it six months). Clearly having the best superhero studio on the planet wasn't enough.

It's a real shame, considering the superb character animations and fantastic voice work gone into making these DC villains come alive.

In his final, posthumous, role in videogames, Kevin Conroy offers a nuanced take on something we've never seen from the man: a Batman gone bad. Thankfully, the veteran voice actor delivers every line just as well as you would expect. When his voice erupts over the soundwaves, I'm instantly transported back to the halls of Arkham Asylum in 2009. That's something that can never be taken away. ■

FAR LEFT: The Hall of Justice? More like the Hall of Holograms.

BELOW: Kevin Conroy never disappoints as Batman.

"Not content with draining Earth's oceans, they've nicked the clouds too"

A less-than-100%-successful attempt to marry HALF-LIFE 2 with RTX Remix

While avoiding doing any actual work one day, I stumbled upon something magnificently fiddly and nerdy that can work to improve the way older games look – as long as you have the right hardware. Nvidia has released a beta version of its RTX Remix tech, which uses the RT and Tensor cores in your GeForce RTX graphics cards (sorry, everyone else) to intercept the graphics pipeline of compatible games, upscale the textures and inject ray-traced lighting.

At least, that's the idea. You can find a list of working titles in places like Reddit and ModDB, and I was looking through it when one name caught my eye: *Splinter Cell*. Oh hell yeah. This game, released in 2002 when the GeForce 4 was all the rage, was notable for putting graphics cards through their paces.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work. This is a beta version of the Remix app, after all. The game sort of launches but throws an error that's hidden behind a fixed black rectangle so I can't read it, let alone interact. Out comes Task Manager.

It's worth noting that RTX Remix isn't something you can just switch on, it's an involved process that takes a lot of work, which I'm not doing, so the results won't be good.

I do manage to get *Half-Life 2* running with the Remix runtime, however, and suddenly a game that takes up 3.8GB on my SSD is filling slightly more than that in my graphics RAM.

IAN EVENDEN

THIS MONTH
Wrecked a perfectly good game by tinkering.

ALSO PLAYED
Pikuniku, Baldur's Gate III

THE REAL FUN BEGINS ONCE I GET OUTSIDE. THERE'S NO SKY

ZERO POINT

Does it make a difference? Well the floor in the train station that begins the game has some reflections on it that I'm sure weren't visible before I started tinkering.

Still, the real fun begins once I get outside. There's no sky. I load various saves to try other levels, but Water Hazard and Follow Freeman are suffering from this insidious Combine trick. Not content with draining Earth's oceans, they've nicked the clouds, probably the ozone layer too. The same is true of the water and even the pupils of NPCs' eyes, so it's probably a bug. I've left the settings on Ultra and Auto as much as possible, so some fiddling with the developer console might bring them back. Elsewhere, dark areas in the game are very dark, filling the tunnel sections with jumpscares as zombies appear from the gloom, and the Pause interface doesn't appear when you press Esc.

There's a full *HL2* RTX Remix project in the works from Orbifold Studios, so we're probably better off waiting for that. ■

RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

Siege's villain era begins with a new operator. *By Mike Stubbs*

Rainbow, the crack team of military operators, has a long and storied history defending the world from evil in Tom Clancy's universe, but now *Rainbow Six Siege* is shaking things up by throwing one of their nemeses to the playable roster with the release of Operation Deadly Omen.

While not technically a member of Rainbow, Deimos is the latest playable operator added to *Siege* in the Year 9 Season 1 update, and for anyone who has followed *Siege* lore of the years he will be a familiar face. Having long been the nemesis of Rainbow, the group has finally captured Deimos and while he hasn't been welcomed back into the team he left years ago, he is now playable operator nonetheless.

Deimos is a two-speed, two-health attack operator who can track your location with his DeathMARK Tracker gadget. When deployed his DeathMARK will reveal the location of one enemy and that enemy will also see the location of Deimos, effectively creating a one-on-one battle to the death. It's not the first gadget to reveal enemy locations, but unlike others, it is one that can be used psychologically rather than just as an info tool.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE December 1 2015	**DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Montreal
PUBLISHER Ubisoft	**LINK** ubisoft.com

Knowing you are being hunted by Deimos changes how you play, as now you know that your position is known and someone is coming for you. It can also distract you from what you were doing before being targeted, leaving you open to being killed by another player who you may have forgotten about in the panic.

Deimos' gadget might not be the coolest in *Siege*, but he does come with another new addition that fills that gap, his .44 Vendetta revolver. As his sidearm, and the only weapon he is allowed to use when he is tracking an enemy, this massive pistol will be a key part of your arsenal and it packs a punch. It can shoot sizeable holes in walls and take out defenders in a couple of shots, making it the perfect option to kill an enemy on the other side of a thin wall.

SIGHTS AND SHIELDS

As with any new season, there are some big changes coming to *Siege* outside of the new evil operator addition. The biggest rework is coming to shield operators, who for a while have felt underwhelming to play as, but frustrating to play against. Now the changes coming in this season should make them feel like more of an actual tank that can also be useful in combat.

The big changes come to where the shield is positioned during certain actions. You can now reload, deploy gadgets and, crucially, free look around without moving your shield and leaving you exposed. The free look is an especially big change, as it now allows you to look both ways when going through a door without leaving your back open to any well-placed enemies who are waiting for you to show up and look the wrong way. You can also use that big shield to smash through doors and windows instantly, which is great fun.

THE BIGGEST REWORK IS COMING TO SHIELD OPERATORS

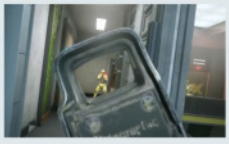
On the other side of the fight, there are more ways to deal with a shield operator who is charging towards you. Now suppressing fire that you know isn't going to get a kill is a viable tactic to slow down a shield, as it stops them from sprinting and will massively reduce their visibility through the shield. Then, despite them being able to do more behind the shield, there should be more small opportunities to land shots on their extremities than before, which should lead to more balanced shield fights for both sides.

The other big overhaul comes to sights and ADS. Now the time to look down your sight has been adjusted depending on what you are using but mostly feels slower, which could make hope fire a little more viable in some situations. It's a change that is designed to slow down the run-and-gun meta that has become so prevalent and further updates through the year will return *Siege* to a more tactical shooter

As far as *Siege* operations go, Deadly Omen might not be the biggest we have ever seen but all the changes have made improvements and with the roadmap for the rest of the year that seems like a trend that is likely to carry on. *Siege* certainly wasn't in a bad place prior to Year 9, but it looks to only be getting better over the coming months. ■

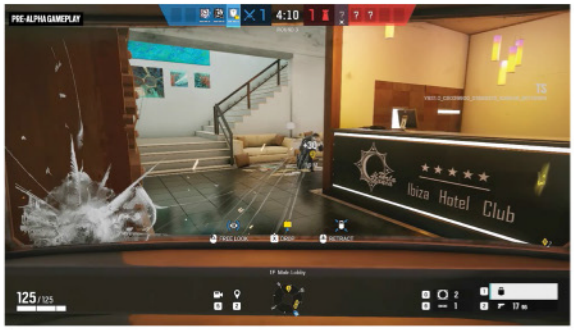
NEW RECRUITS *Siege's future updates in Year 9*

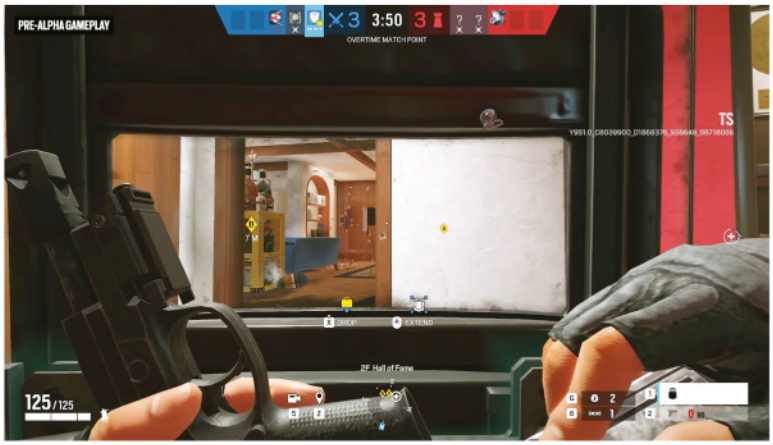
SEASON 2
The first operator rework of the year is to Recruit, who will hopefully become more than just the one you are forced to play as before you unlock the fun characters. Season 2 will also bring the launch of the Siege Marketplace where you can buy and sell skins.



SEASON 3
Another new Greek operator joins in Season 3 but we have no other details just yet. But We do know that the Siege Cup tournament, an in-game competition that offers big rewards to those who do well, will launch alongside a revamped versus AI mode.

SEASON 4
Rounding out the year is a rework to one of the American operators, as well as updates to cross-play. At the same time, a big anti-cheat update will launch that promises to instantly kick any cheaters who show up to ruin things.





FAR LEFT: You can now do a lot behind the safety of your shield

LEFT: Shooting directly at a shield is no longer pointless.

Deimos' big revolver can do serious damage.

PALWORLD

The biggest game of 2024 is getting lots of attention from modders. *By Christopher Livingston*

Just in case you stepped away from your computer, and Twitch, and TikTok, and the entire internet for the past couple of months, here's a news flash: *Palworld* is a bonafide hit. The Early Access co-op survival game that combines *Pokémon*-ish creature-collecting with lots of guns and base-building is massive. Within a few days of its Early Access launch it drew millions of players and became the number one game on Steam. People just want to catch 'em all: Pals, that is.

And as with any big game, along with the players come a ton of modders. Whether you're playing solo or with friends on a server, you might be looking for some ways to tweak *Palworld* by changing your stats, modifying your critters, playing with the rules, or just plain cheating your butt off. There aren't a huge number of mods yet, but there are enough to give you a lot more flexibility in how you play.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE Jan 18, 2024	**DEVELOPER** Pocketpair
PUBLISHER Pocketpair	**LINK** pocketpair.jp/palworld

LEGAL EAGLES

As you're probably aware, Nintendo is a trifle litigious when it comes to anyone infringing on its properties, so it's no doubt keeping a close eye on *Palworld* – since the critters in Pocketpair's survival game are pretty clearly inspired by *Pokémon*. In fact, one modder has already been swept up in some legal trouble: a YouTuber named Toasted Shoes who uploaded a Twitter

CATCH 'EM ALL

Looking for Pokémon-like games on PC?

CASSETTE BEASTS
Delightfully retro, and instead of catching critters you record them onto tapes to do battle.

MOONSTONE ISLAND
Mixes a creature-catcher with a life and farming sim, plus a card-based battle system.

TEMTEM
The closest thing to *Pokémon* on PC as you collect creatures and do battle with NPCs and players.

OOBLETS
There's no fighting – just dance battles. It's also a farming sim as you grow crops.

TOP: Mods help you keep track of all your Pals.

FAR LEFT: *Palworld* is already wild: mods make it wilder.

video of their *Palworld* to *Pokémon* mod – which lets you import celebrities like Pikachu, Electabuzz, Misty and Ash Ketchum – was quickly hit with a DMCA notice.

That particular mod is a big no-no, but that didn't stop Toasted Shoes from having a little more fun. Now you can install *The Legally-Distinct Pocket Creatures Mod Pack* that includes non-copyright-infringing critters like Yellow Rat, Educated Owl, Floral Deer and other bland, generic types of monsters that definitely aren't breaking the law. And just to be clear, you don't catch them in a Pokéball or a Pal Sphere, but a Jar. It may not be all that exciting, but at least no one will get sued over it. And speaking of lawyers, the mod also replaces one of *Palworld*'s bosses with a giant DMCA notice with a very special lawyer riding atop it: Saul Goodman of Better Call Saul fame. So far, Bob Odenkirk hasn't sued.

THE WORLD IS YOURS

You're already dominating the lives of your Pals, so why not use a few mods to dominate the world you live in, too? A mod called *MapUnlocker* does what you'd probably expect: it completely reveals the entire map the moment you install it, letting you see everything that's out there. Sounds like it would take some of the fun out of exploration, but I'm not here to judge. That's not the only way to take over the world of *Palworld*: a mod called *All The Bases* by BaronKiko expands the number of bases you can have from three to... well, I'll just say it. To 128. 128 bases! I can't imagine why you'd need 128 bases, but if you want to build that many, hey, this mod will let you do it.

Speaking of maps, can I interest you in a minimap? Despite its name, the *Basic Minimap* mod is actually pretty advanced. Not only does it give you a nice view of your local surroundings, it's highly configurable. You can choose where the minimap will appear on your screen, you can set it to autohide during combat, it'll auto-zoom when your camera is obstructed, you can set it to always face north, and more.

PAL ANALYZER

There's a handful of mods that focus on your Pals, too. Two of them, *Pal Info* and *Pal Analyzer*, help by giving you lots of useful stats about your Pals' skills, attacks, work speeds, and more data, in an easy to view window that pops up when you hover over your Pals with your mouse or aiming reticle.

And while you're twisting the world to meet your needs, why not do the same with time itself? The mod called *Pause – Freeze Time* by yakuzadeso will stop time in its tracks whenever you need a breather.

For more options you should also check out the *Palworld* Gameplay Tweaks mod, which will let you adjust a ton of settings including your stamina consumption for activities like jumping and climbing, change your hunger and health regeneration rates, movement speed, respawn time and lots more. You can even juke the settings to make rare pals spawn more often.

SOME WAYS TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE ON THE STEAM DECK

It's pretty comprehensive and works both in singleplayer and on dedicated servers.

PAL PERFORMANCE

There are also a few *Palworld* visual mods, but not everyone out there is looking to spice up the view with ray tracing, increased draw distance, and other tweaks. A lot of people are looking for ways to improve performance on the Steam Deck, especially when games aren't certified for the Deck yet. We're seeing more and more Steam Deck mods these days, and *Palworld* is no different: the mod called *Steam Deck Essentials* by TheHybred should be on your list if you're planning to take *Palworld* onto your handheld.

The mod can pare down some of the visual effects, optimises things like antialiasing and motion blur, and gives *Palworld* a more cartoony look that will increase your FPS on the Steam Deck. Keep in mind, this mod overwrites the Engine.ini file and requires you to add a launch argument to your Steam client, so make sure you read the mod's install instructions on its Nexus Mods page carefully first. ■

GET STARTED IN

PALWORLD

Assemble a Pal workforce and build your base. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

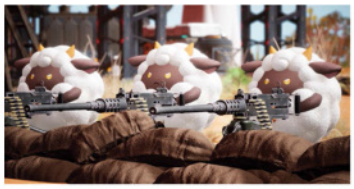
DIFFICULTY
Easy

TIME
15 hours

VITAL LINKS

Best Pals to grab early:
pcgamer.com/palworld-best-pals

How to breed Pals:
pcgamer.com/palworld-breeding-guide-combinations

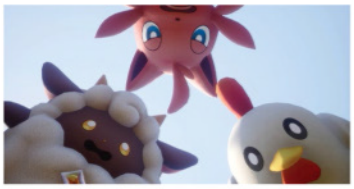


SETTING UP

1 The first step in creating your perfect *Palworld* should be changing the Custom Settings as you start a new game. These can speed up levelling, help make combat easier, or reduce the absurd amount of time it takes to incubate Pal eggs.

BASED SPOT

2 Once you've arrived you'll have to set up your first base to start building. You might not think much about this at first, but your base location is very important. Ideally, for long term viability, you want to be close to some of the shiny ore rocks, plus a fast travel point.



CATCH 'EM ALL

3 Now you're ready to catch Pals. As in *Pokémon*, weakening Pals increases capture chance, so make sure to whack them a bit until their health is low. You can craft more Pal Spheres at the workbench, but also find them lying around in the world.

WORK SUITABILITIES

4 So you've finally got some Pals in your base; time to think about Work Suitabilities. Each Pal can perform a number of jobs with varying efficiency, indicated by the symbols and numbers. Lv4 is the strongest, but early on you'll mainly encounter Lv1 Pals.

ALPHA PALS

5 You'll have to fight these open world bosses if you want to get Ancient Technology Points and Ancient Civilization Parts. You can capture these supersized Pals, though it'll be a challenge. Another variant you might also find are the Lucky Pals.

HATCH 'EM ALL

6 While exploring the islands you'll likely spot and squirrel away a fair few brightly coloured Pal eggs. Once you build the Egg Incubator, you can start hatching these to collect even more Pals of different types.

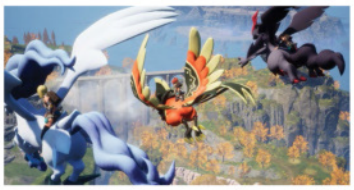
SUPER EFFECTIVE

7 Time to use that small army of Pals you've amassed in combat. In *Palworld*, each Pal has an element that's effective against another, which essentially goes like this: Fire > Grass > Ground > Electric > Water > Fire > Ice > Dragon > Dark > Neutral.

MATCHMAKING *Breed new and powerful Pals*

PARTNER SKILLS

8 Another combat consideration is Partner Skills. Some Pals have skills already unlocked, but others require you to craft Pal Gear once you've caught them in order to unlock their powerful abilities. Lifmunk's SMG, for example, lets the leafy Pal sit on your head while you aim.



MOUNTS

9 Certain Partner Skills will let you use that Pal as a mount. Level-wise, Rushoar is the earliest you can unlock if you catch one, but Melpaca, Direhowl, and Eikthyrdeer are all other early game mounts that you can grab to speed your way around the map.

MERCHANTS

10 If you ever need new materials but don't know where to get them, merchants can be a great way of buying what you need. There's one in the Small Settlement to the west across the water from where you start in the Windswept Hills, but there are plenty more out there.

BLACK MARKETEER

11 For those looking to buy or even sell Pals you've stolen from other players like some dastardly Team Rocket member, the Black Marketeer will purchase them for cash. While there's one of these in each region, you can find the first in the Abandoned Mineshaft.

TOWER BOSSES

12 Your base is up and running and you've got some Pals with Partner Skills; what do you do now? You should seek out the towers and defeat the boss in each region. These are *Palworld*'s version of *Pokémon*'s gym leaders.

SEARCHING FOR LOST PIRATE TREASURE IN STARFIELD

PART 3

Espionage, betrayal and bloodshed: Jett Johnson is back! *By Matt Poskitt*

The Last Nova. A dark, dingy bar where lowlifes, mercenaries and those pledged to The Crimson Fleet come to drink away their miseries. Scarlet red engulfs the entire room, suggesting that the pirate faction doesn't dare use any other colour for fear of treachery, or some other psychotic reason that I'm sure a therapist could make thousands from. Some generic metal music plays in the background, shouting barely distinguishable words. In the middle of all of this is Jett Johnson who necks the remnants of his whisky. That was his seventh glass, and probably won't be his last. A lot has happened. There's no turning back now.

Rewinding to the moment we previously left off, our leading man had just successfully infiltrated the Crimson Fleet on behalf of the UC System Defense. It wasn't a path he expected to go down but after being caught red-handed with a boatload of the illegal hallucinogenic Aurora (remember when Jett licked a guy's earlobe – ahhh, those were the days) he had little choice.

"When you sign up with the Crimson Fleet, you're in it for the long haul. No one quits, no one retires. The only way out is death. You stay loyal or you pay the consequences. Fleet before friends. Fleet before family. Fleet before yourself." These were the words barked by Crimson Fleet leader Delgado upon first meeting. Naeva Mora, second-in-command, has vouched for Jett after he ruthlessly offed a former member. "I hope that doesn't include 'Fleet before breakfast' because I like to sleep late," remarks Jett, only to see his reply go down like a lead balloon. Maybe not the time for jokes.

Suvorov, a lone planet in the Kryx system. The ground is frozen as far as the eye can see, making it both dazzling and deadly. The Kapowksi lands a few hundred yards from Delgado and his men as they prepare to infiltrate a now-derelict prison. For a pirate, he's very well groomed – most notably, a smartly shaped beard and mighty moustache. What counteracts this is the grisly scar falling over his right eye and the unsettling glare that accompanies it. Next to him is Mathis Castillo, a fellow rookie who also sports a finely formed beard (whoever the Crimson Fleet's barber is, they deserve a pay rise) and is incredibly pissed off by the time Jett arrives. That pick-me-up en route might have been a bad idea.

KRYX'S LEGACY

The purpose of this mission is to find clues about the treasure of Jasper Kryx, the founder of the Crimson Fleet who was imprisoned on Suvorov. If true, this could be how Jett affords all those piña coladas on a beach at the edge of the universe. Just wasting away days basking in the light of a red dwarf star like Proxima Centauri. A happy ending in paradise might be on the cards. For now, he needs to concentrate on the task at hand.

"WHEN YOU SIGN UP WITH THE CRIMSON FLEET, YOU'RE IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL"

A nest of grylloba ambush the group before reaching the prison entrance. These blue insects are the thing of nightmares... that is if Jett had nightmares, he usually blacks out around 4am instead. Jett dispatches each grylloba like a SAS elite in his prime, impressing Delgado and infuriating Mathis. Once inside, it doesn't take long for more of the bugs to show up, eating two alive lackeys when they don't react fast enough. A nasty way to go for sure. Once the critters are decimated, an ice deposit collapses separating Jett and Mathis from the rest of the pirates. It's a treacherous route back. Tight enclosures, Ruined walkways. Grylloba attacks. So many stairs! And Mathis, who won't shut up about mutiny of all things.

"We use this opportunity to take out Delgado, and, at the same time, make some serious credits for ourselves," he proposes. Jett isn't having it, regardless if money is the way to his heart. Delgado might be bad but Mathis is annoying – that's way worse in his books. The two continue to Kryx's cell where details of the treasure are discovered in a lamp, which Jett serendipitously knocked over in a drunken slump. Not only is Kryx's legacy real but it's a lost GalBank transport ship loaded with credits! Oh, this is too good to be true. A fitting finale for Jett Johnson is in my sights.

After single-handily dispatching a ginormous grylloba (seriously, this thing was the size of a house) we reunite with Delgado on The Key space station. Naturally, Jett takes all the credit literally and figuratively. Naeva Mora seems to be pleased too, although it might just be the fact that our anti-hero has now showered for the first time since they met. Mathis, now cut from the Fleet for proving useless on the expedition (there's also that talk of treachery to take into account too) throws out an idle threat, "You better watch your back," he says, storming off. Jett laughs at the idea of this feeble man being anything more than a well-bearded bump in the road.

Not looking to waste any further time, the luxury Trident starliner

THE RULES

1. Take no prisoners: always opt for the 'Attack' option when offered.

2. Sarcasm at its finest: choose the most sarcastic or rudest dialogue at all times.

3. Avoid Constellation missions and instead help out anyone who needs it... for a price.

Awkward silence.

THE STARS OF STARFIELD *Meet the main players in Jett Johnson's latest adventure*

DELGADO
The leader of the Crimson Fleet.

NAEVA MORA
Crimson Fleet second-in-command.

MATHIS CASTILLO
A fellow Crimson Fleet rookie.

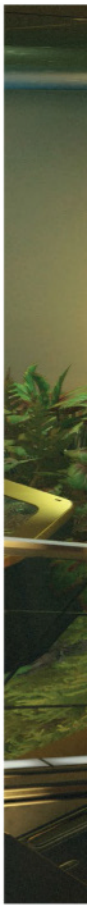
KIBWE IKANDE
Commander of the UC System Defense (or UC SysDef).

LARRY DUMBROSKY
GalBank executive aboard the Siren of the Stars.

KLAUDIA SWIST
A programmer having an affair with Larry.

GABRIEL VERA
UC security official working with Larry and Klaudia.

EVGENY ROKOV
Siren of the Stars captain who wants in on The Crimson Fleet.



– known as the Siren of the Stars – has been identified as the next destination. Here, GalBank executive Larry Dumbrosky is attending a charity fundraiser (not that he knows what the charity is for). Jett's attended a few charity events. One in particular lost him 60,000 credits when he accurately guessed the price of a boat, later discovering it was an auction. Or was that an episode of Friends? Decades of drinking have blurred his memories together. The Mr Beaumont is a beaut of a vessel, mind.

Looking to infiltrate the gala in the Starview Ballroom, Jett dons a hideous green suit that he wouldn't dare be caught in if the mission didn't require it. The irony of going undercover while already being undercover brings a sneaky smile to his perfectly formed face. One glance at the mirror, a splash of cheap cologne, and it's showtime.

THE NAME'S JOHNSON, JETT JOHNSON

Working with Evgeny Rokov, the captain of the Siren of the Stars, the pair look to acquire Larry's ID so they can locate Kryx's lost ship via the GalBank's archive found on New Atlantis. The two of them get on like a house on fire with talk of free booze at the party quickly fuelling their friendship. It's been a long time since Jett hung out with a friend without the risk of death echoing in the backdrop. Maybe one day, he can let his guard down for good.

Schmoozing these rich fatcats isn't an issue for Jett. He flirts. He laughs audaciously. He buys drinks (because of course he does). He even gets a limbo started, showing just how sprightly he is for his age. It doesn't take long to find out about an affair between Klaudia Swist and Larry. Who knew the rich liked to gossip?! It takes less time to convince the girl to give up her paramour, explaining through tears that they and UC security member Gabriel Vera have been working on a scheme to defraud GalBank customers. "The nerve of it. If anyone is taking money from GalBank customers it's me," thinks Jett.

A brief conversation with Gabriel proves fruitless. This is a man who will not be blackmailed. If only Larry could be separated from his entourage momentarily then no bloodshed would be required. I meet with Evgeny to discuss the next course of action and ponder whether there could be more between Jett and the captain if *Starfield*'s romance options allowed for it. A few long nights of swapping stories over drinks, singing karaoke to Avril Lavigne and being thrown out of a wedding they were never invited to, is one of the many fantasies I could envisage for these two. As this isn't a choice made available, it appears they are doomed for a life of friendship. Snapping back to reality, an idea springs forth.

On Evgeny's recommendation, I can disable the life support system which will then prompt all guests to return to their quarters. It's worth noting at this point that the option to kill Larry Dumbrosky has hovered over the mission status since arriving at the party, a command that neither myself nor Jett wants to make. I'm also confident Commander Kibwe Ikande of the UC System Defense will not be best pleased about those casualties, either.

The alarm sounds. Everyone withdraws to their rooms. I run to Larry's private suite now changed into full assault gear, only to spot Gabriel's door partially open on the way. The security chief is pacing back and forth. Scattered across the floor are boxes of ammunition and weapon cases. Let's try this negotiating malarkey again.

"You must think I'm stupid. There's no way I'd possibly incriminate myself by handing over the evidence," says Gabriel, baulking at the idea of blackmailing Larry. Once more the security chief is proving stubborn. It's then that attack

BELOW: Squad up.

WAS IT A RUSHED DECISION? COULD PERSUASION HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE?

option presents itself, "You don't need to worry about anything ever again," Jett responds, shooting Gabriel point blank between the eyes. Somehow, security hears the gunshot among the deafening alarms, so sprinting to Larry's quarters is the only choice. A handful of hapless workers collide en route, leading to further casualties.

Thankfully, it was quick and painless. Larry didn't say a word, staring straight down the barrel like a criminal on death row waiting for the inevitable. It was as if he knew it was coming all along. Was it a rushed decision? Could persuasion have been possible? It doesn't matter now. It's too late... and this is where all hell breaks loose.

All it takes is a quick ID scan as well as a cheeky wink to an employee on his first day and Jett's got the location of the Legacy from the GalBank archives on New Atlantis. When exiting, I pass the building where Constellation resides, briefly dreaming about in the life Jett could have lived if things had gone differently. Potentially more lives could have been spared, or the universe's secrets might have been unlocked, but would pirate treasure be on the horizon? Would we have truly learned who Jett Johnson is? I'm not so sure.

This outcome of the mission pleases Delgado but angers Ikande, who as predicted is not happy about the deaths when reporting back. So much so, that Jett's off the undercover assignment altogether and is sentenced to the brig. Well, ol' Jett's not having any of it, sick of this Steve Rogers wannabe's attitude. "Oh, to hell with this," he says taking the attack dialogue prompt without hesitation and making a breaking for the door. Amazingly, this time it works, avoiding enough firepower and Ikande's demonic turrets to escape.

Retreating to The Last Nova, Jett pulls up a chair at the bar and orders a glass of whisky. "Well, in for a penny," he says, breathing a sigh of relief. ■

ABOVE: You had me at "free booze".

BELOW LEFT: The Siren of the Stars floats majestically above Aranae IV.

COOKING IN KYNSEED

This weird RPG has beautiful foods and tactile kitchen tasks. *By Lauren Morton*

LEFT: Scraping herbs into the pot is the moment I fell in love.

There's a long-time understanding that Japanese anime has an intense love of food. Clips from Studio Ghibli movies make the rounds on social media, where fans gush over the care taken to animate sizzling shrimp, scrambling eggs, or slicing vegetables.

Videogames, even those entirely about simulating cooking, don't often incite the same fascination. Games like *Venba* make food beautiful while party games like *Cooking Mama* turn the kitchen into a series of minigames, but it's the weird intergenerational RPG *Kynseed* that's assembled the perfect spread of beautiful and interactive cooking that I can't stop thinking about.

Kynseed's pixel-art style is a key piece of the recipe. The intricately detailed sprite designs are lovely in every area, but in my homestead kitchen specifically it comes out in the grain of a wood spoon, the veins and waves in a single leaf of lettuce, and juicy interior of a sliced tomato. The bright hues and colourful shadows of *Kynseed*'s artwork immediately gave me that anime-level food love feeling when I started playing. Once I took a bite into the minigames, I was properly hooked.

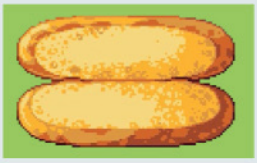
The first recipe I can cook is blueberry jam: requiring only honey from the bee box and blueberries from the bushes of my family farm. The very first task is chopping the berries laid out on a cutting board. I guide my knife over top of each one with my mouse and then click to chop into it with a satisfying thock of my blade on the board. The berry halves tumble and roll just a tad before settling and when they're all sliced, my cutting board tips. I instinctively know to put my knife at the edge of the wood, click to chop down, and then drag my mouse to scrape the berries into my pot of boiling water. I giggled with glee.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE December 6, 2022	**EXPECT TO PAY** £20
OUR REVIEW 89%	**LINK** kynseed.com

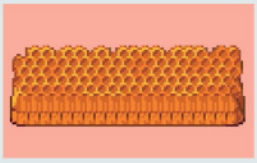
NICE SLICE

The most beautiful foods so far



HOAGIE ROLL
I can basically taste the crispy exterior on the sandwich roll.

TOMATOES
The of seeds and detailed interior make a beautiful fruit.



HONEYCOMB
When I cut into it, honey leaks out of these glistening combs.

LETTUCE
It almost feels wrong to chop such a soft-looking leaf.

THE VERY FIRST TASK IS CHOPPING THE BERRIES LAID OUT ON A CUTTING BOARD

Jam is easy, thankfully, but *Kynseed* cranks up the difficulty quickly as I unlock new recipes. Soon there are hourglass timers for each ingredient, a burner to manage so that my stew doesn't boil over, and an oven minigame for nailing the bake time on my pies. I'm delighted by every new task that *Kynseed* throws at me. Some are more abstract, like clicking at the precise time as a cursor moves across a bar to simulate bake time, but most are very literal.

To chop honeycomb or lamb meat I have to click as my knife moves from left to right to cut them into appropriately small slices. When it comes time for the pie topper, I click and drag my rolling pin first top to bottom, side to side, then diagonally, being careful to keep it as evenly circular as possible before the dough is too thin. When it comes time to boil a stew, I chop my ingredients as I already know how, but the hourglass timers for each indicate how long they should cook. I slice and stew my carrot first, followed closely after by the lamb meat. Then I wait just a few moments, watching their timers trickle away, before I scrape my lettuce leaf in last so that all three ingredients finish cooking as close together as possible.

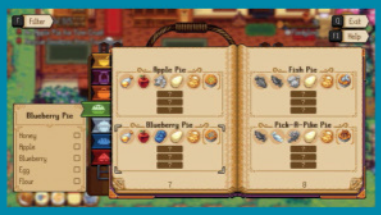
TACTILE TASKING

The realism of each minigame makes the entire experience so pleasantly intuitive. Of course I should slide my mouse forward to insert the pie into the oven or chop and scrape to add vegetables to my pot. There's a real joy when any game manages to strip layers of artifice from a minigame.

That combination of beauty and accuracy is what I continue to find so enjoyable about experimenting in my *Kynseed* kitchen. Though I'd got a legacy to pass on per the actual goals of the game's story, I find myself wandering to the next town over to visit the town shop in hopes of finding a new recipe or exploring deep into the woods searching for the sparkle of a piece of paper on the ground. I've gone hunting for a particular pond catch just to fry up a bluefish toastie because it looks like a gooey grilled panini I'd like to eat.

Kynseed also uses a similar set of tactile minigames for its medicine making and blacksmithing activities, which are enjoyable, but its kitchen endeavours are the clear victory. ■

LEFT: Even though it's a little more abstract, the oven timer is great.



DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED

Chafing against the robot arms future in this incredible immersive sim. *By Ted Litchfield*

I never played *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* at launch. I'd just gotten a PC that could handle this 2016 GPU punisher (I'll always love you, GTX 1080) when it first came out, but something stayed my hand. Some combination of Square Enix's bombastic marketing, Eidos Montreal's ham-fisted use of robot arms as an allegory for racism, and the creeping sense of doom at seeing a largely divergent, self-contained story presented as a 'prequel' start to butt against its fictional timeline constraints totally gave me the ick.

In the years since, it's become apparent that Eidos Montreal's planned trilogy will likely never be concluded – we're entering full reboot territory now, almost eight years later – and that's only further discouraged me from diving back into the developer's vision of the 2020s.

After falling in love with *Human Revolution* all over again, despite its vexingly flawed and self-serious sci-fi (check out the Reinstall feature in PC Gamer issue 387 for more on that!), I knew it was time to give *Mankind Divided* the old college try on my trusty Steam Deck.

MACROTRANSACTIONS

The first thing I noticed, unfortunately, was all that Square Enix premium microtransaction (please excuse my language) bullshit. Videogame microtransactions 'won' a long time ago, but they have their accepted use cases. Square Enix tried to use *Mankind Divided* as some kind of laboratory for its vision of a dark future, one where you pay $60 for a game and then have it advertise paid cheat codes to you.

You can buy gear packs, in-game currency and level-ups, while there's also some kind of 'Square Enix Club' that ties into these weird QR code puzzle collectibles – it all has the anachronistic, disorienting feeling of a failed bet on the future, the monetisation equivalent of Betamax or HD DVD. Who in 2016 actually spent 99 cents on a Praxis kit? Did the *Deus Ex* real money pay to win store even recoup the cost of its development and implementation?

I'm more mystified than upset. The Square Enix Club option on the

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE August 23, 2016	**DEVELOPER** Eidos Montreal
PUBLISHER Square Enix	**LINK** eidosmontreal.com

ABOVE: Dubai's future depiction feels odd in *Mankind Divided*.

RIGHT: Jensen's apartment is suitably cyberpunk dystopian, shutter rays and all.

menu takes you to a broken link, while seeing the store option on my Steam Deck in 2024 feels like beholding Ozymandias' prideful ruins out in the desert. Where does money spent at that store even go to now, The Embracer Group? I'm sure the now-ailing conglomerate that purchased Eidos Montreal from Squeenix in 2022 could use every cent it can get.

PLAYING POLITICS

Mankind Divided begins with a tame, relatively linear mission in a ruined Dubai, part of a Middle East that largely lagged behind the world by refusing to embrace human augmentation technology and remaining 'addicted' to oil export revenue as the world transitions to 'clean' energy (I freaking wish, brother!). This immediately flares up one of my pain points with Eidos Montreal's *Deus Ex* prequels: they have a vision of the near future (quickly becoming the present day) that's somehow simultaneously middlebrow, utterly deranged, and supremely self-serious and satisfied.

The neo-*Deus Ex* canon posits that Saudi Arabia and Iran put aside their differences in the early 2020s and brought the rest of the Middle East to heel as some kind of massive superstate. It's also somehow not a new world power based on the idea that the oil's already run out (laughable in 2024) and some kind of cultural taboo against robot arms kept them from embracing the tech.

This is insane. Not only is this monster state's rump status laughable in the face of the Gulf countries' increasing economic dominance in the real world (a failed deal with Saudi Arabia is what's sinking Eidos Montreal's new publisher, The Embracer Group), it's also racist in a supremely dumb guy kind of way.

THERE'S ALSO SOME KIND OF 'SQUARE ENIX CLUB' THAT TIES INTO THESE QR CODES

BUYER'S REMORSE *The dumb things you can buy*

NEW GUNS

Just a little bit exciting, but aren't unique weapon variants something you could have just included in the game, maybe organically integrated with how you progress? I'd rather kill a boss for these than pay Square Enix six real-life bucks.

PRAXIS KITS

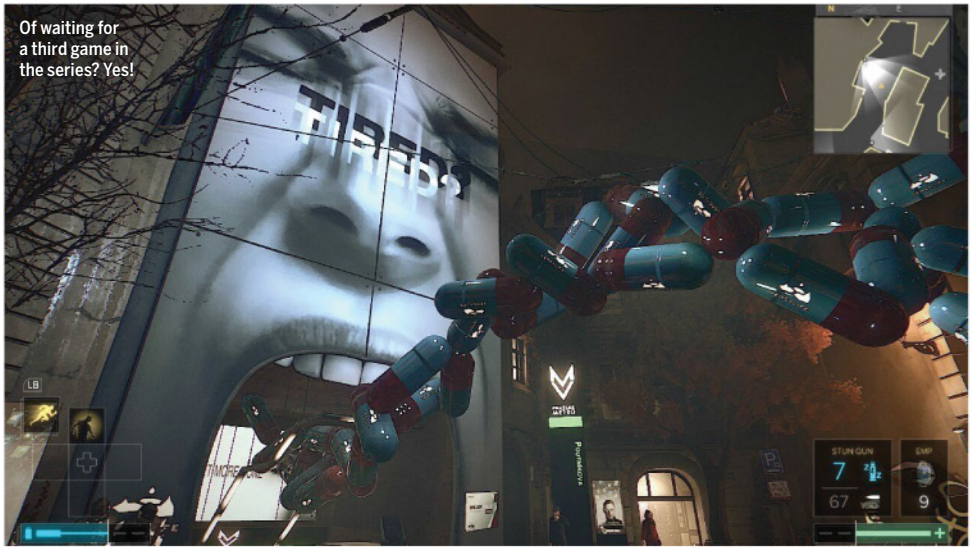
Free level ups, basically. You get a ton by just, you know, playing the game? It's an RPG, man, you don't have to spend more money just for your abilities. I didn't even notice that I got five freebies on reserve with my GOTY edition and I've still had plenty.

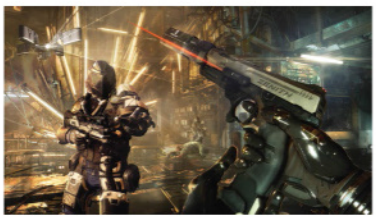
MONEY

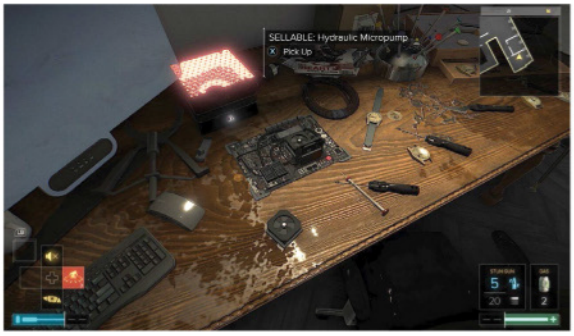
Quite possibly the most insulting of all: ten bucks of real world legal tender you could spend on sustenance or gifts for your loved ones nets you 15,000 credits in a game where I've had more resources than I've ever known what to do with.

TRIANGLE CODES

The existence of these you collect and then do something with involving the dead Square Enix Club annoys me so much I refuse to look up what they were for. Maybe I'm missing out on the best part of *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* but I doubt it.







FAR LEFT: Non-lethal weapons are an option, but they're not the most fun.

LEFT: Looks a lot like my PC gaming desk if I'm being honest.

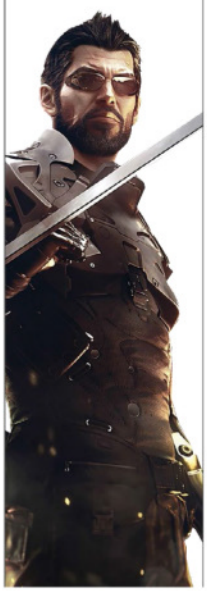
TOP: Fully upgrade the Combat Rifle for big stopping power.

Iran is Persian, with Farsi the dominant language, but this fiction seems to lump it in with some kind of monolithic 'The Middle East'.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are regional rivals that wage proxy wars with each other, while a newspaper in *Mankind Divided* refers to Iran as an 'Arab state'. This is like saying Japan and China are the same thing, it's almost too stupid to be racist, a Wikipedia skim by an editor away from being fixed.

Speaking of China, Eidos Montreal's treatment of the country has never sat right with me. The villainous corporation Tai Yong Medical is like a slurry of the most lazy western tropes about China: it's almost cartoonishly evil to its employees, recycling them for aug parts while churning out 'cheap knockoff goods' that infringe on the patents of honest, mom and pop robot arm/weapon manufacturers like protagonist Adam Jensen's old employer, Sarif Industries. I've always found this to be more profoundly, perniciously sinophobic than any of the unfortunate voice acting in the OG *Deus Ex*'s Hong Kong level.

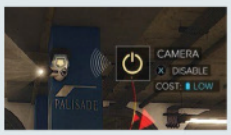
This is all dancing around The Big One: 'Aug Lives Matter'. Though the apocalyptically tone-deaf co-opting of the Black Lives Matter slogan only showed up in *Mankind Divided*'s concept art, it's a great shorthand for the game's baffling commitment to using the theoretical treatment of people with robot arms as a clumsy allegory for racism. After everything went FUBAR in *Human Revolution*, robot arm havers are now brutally discriminated against: denied employment, forced into robot arm ghettos, and called cringe-worthy fake slurs like 'clank'. *Mankind Divided* doesn't have anything particularly interesting to say on the matter either, "Robot arms racism is bad, but also people with robot arms might be really dangerous? Who can say?" It's goofy and I might not mind so much if *Mankind Divided* didn't play it so maudlin and take itself so goddamn seriously.



AND YET...

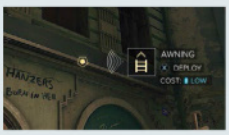
I sure do sound down on this game, but that's because I haven't gotten to how it plays yet: *Mankind Divided* is simply one of the best immersive sims. Despite Squeenix chaining on these millstones of microtransactions, in-game marketing, and cutting the story short for a third game that would never come, Eidos Montreal still delivered a triumph.

SMART HACK *My favourite aug's best targets*



SECURITY CAMERAS

Of course you're going to want to knock these puppies out. Complicated by Smart Hack only working on them temporarily, it's still plenty of time to make it to a terminal and disable them completely.



AWNINGS

You can use awnings in Prague and these weird, futuristic windows in Golem City as platforms to reach secret paths or break into people's apartments. Pairs well with the boost jump aug.

SHUTTERS

Crack open people's windows so you can steal their armour piercing ammo and EMP grenades. When God locks a door with a level 5 hack-proof terminal, Adam Jensen will just open a window.

Mankind Divided's Prague is full-stop one of the best hub/non-combat areas I've ever seen in a videogame. It's small, but also dense. Before ever attempting the first story mission after that Dubai tutorial, I spent ten whole hours just bumming around the city breaking into people's apartments, reading their emails and stealing their inexplicable war chests of stun gun ammo.

Prague is peak videogame area design to me, just time and money and effort poured into making a small section of a city as tangible and real as possible. There are very few games that do it this well: *Disco Elysium*'s Martinaise, Larian's take on the city of Baldur's Gate, as well as the original *Deus Ex*'s levels in Hong Kong and Paris are a few of the short listers that come to mind for me.

One of my favourite moments has been aimlessly stumbling through the sewers looking for ammo and Praxis kits, only to find a utopian commune held together by a failed magician playing at being The Wizard of Oz. A bit of investigation, creative thinking, and dialogue puzzling helped me convince him of the error of his ways, but I also could have just snuck up behind him for a bit of the old stealth takedown treatment. This is what a videogame sidequest should be: just getting surprised by a rabbit hole of a story where you least expect it.

DEUS EX HAS BEEN WRITTEN INTO A BIT OF A CORNER THANKS TO THE PREQUELS

Adam Jensen's new augment powers are a real treat as well – my favourites are a remote hacking feature that opens up all kinds of new routes to mischief and a *Dishonored*-style short-range teleport. The hacking minigame's been made about 45% more annoying than it was in *Human Revolution*, encouraging you to invest into the skills that make it easier, but I didn't mind that too much. Even with this consideration, I've still been swimming in aug-upgrading Praxis kits, and Eidos Montreal really upped its game when it comes to whimsical hidden paths: vents, breakable walls, and hackable platforms for climbing all make stealth and exploration harmonise like almost nothing else I've played.

TOP: Prague is a fantastic, dense hub to explore.

OH I'M ASKING

For all my grousing about neo-*Deus Ex*'s self-indulgent big picture sci-fi, its story, characters, and setting all have a real charm that keeps me coming back. Elias Toufexis' Adam Jensen is an iconic videogame character, and I'd love to step back into his shoes someday.

Deus Ex has been written into a bit of a corner thanks to the prequels butting against the originals timeline-wise, but who cares? Continuity is for nerds I say, and the *Deus Ex* prequels and original games are just completely incompatible story-wise besides. I'd be more than happy if Eidos Montreal could just resurrect its characters and aesthetic to keep spinning its own take on the idea of *Deus Ex*: keep Jensen's story going or even retell it while committing to a new fictional timeline that allows enough creative freedom to do so.

That is, of course, assuming that anything acquired by the once-mighty Embracer Group survives its bafflingly rapid collapse – the conglomerate that consolidated too greedily and too quick, and struck a failed $2 billion Saudi investment deal. In the meantime, the recent legacy of *Deus Ex* will remain two phenomenal immersive sims with charismatic casts, a fantastic sense of style, and what I might describe as a dumb guy's idea of smart guy sci-fi. ■

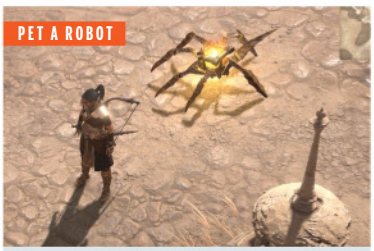
MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST OF THE BEST GAMES YOU CAN PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Tyler Colp

TYLER COLP

I'm the guy who has a TikTok algorithm featuring a DJ remixing *Final Fantasy* music with hip hop and teens drawing a cool S to the score of Oppenheimer.



DIABLO IV

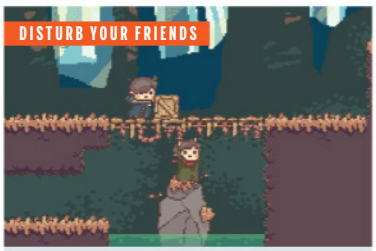
rb.gy/opjhii

Everyone has adopted a robot spider in *Diablo IV*'s latest season and, in addition to having it solo entire bosses, you can pet it. It's like everyone is a Necromancer except this little minion is actually useful. Everyone knows that slaying demons with a pet rules.

HONKAI: STAR RAIL

rb.gy/nysp17

BioShock was sorely lacking anime girls, and *Honkai: Star Rail* is here to fix that. The new area, Penacony, is what would happen if Rapture was a theme park. Sink into a story of dream logic and corruption in one of the best free-to-play RPGs around.



BOKURA

rb.gy/ux9rxs

In this 2D sidescroller, reality is merely an illusion. *Bokura* is a co-op game where each player sees the world very differently. A mechanical lift for one player might be an elevator made out of bone for the other. This game is as fascinating as it is horrific.

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

rb.gy/vpskxp

The *Suicide Squad* game isn't as bad as its trailers made it look: barrelling through Metropolis as each of the characters rules. The loot is forgettable, but swinging and catapulting with your buddies isn't. Play this as a laid back co-op game.

LAST EPOCH

rb.gy/20o2ss

If Blizzard games aren't your thing, *Last Epoch* aims to make a splash as an ARPG made for ARPG folks. Build-brained players will be lost in the loot and the expansive crafting system. Early Access helped refine the game's systems so that every skill feels creative and fun to use.

LETHAL COMPANY

rb.gy/m8rgex

Moon's haunted, but you have a quota. This co-op horror game sends you and your friends planetside to find valuable items and horrible monsters. But hold on: this is a comedy game where you're the punch line, pratfalling off bridges and getting torn apart by bees.

JUSANT

rb.gy/mmtx4v

The world is empty and yet you still climb onward and literally upward. In *Jusant*, you clamber to the top of a world and learn about what came before. It's a struggle, but a meaningful one that is perfect as a chill pastime, especially if you're playing on the Steam Deck.

DREAD DELUSION

rb.gy/9e962n

Dread Delusion is *Morrowind* but somehow weirder. Fans of *Skyrim* and RPGs need to soak in this surreal archaic world. This game remembers a time when RPGs were puzzles that held secrets and lore and lets you explore as freely as you want. Few games are as weird as this.

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MEET THE PC GAMER CAPTAIN

Under the fearsome PC (that's 'Piratical Company') Gamer captain **BOBERT BONES**, the PC gaming privateers roam the virtual gaming seas with one goal, to defeat console gamers and loot them of their XP, booty and – crucially – bragging rights

The PC 'Piratical Company' Gamer Code

1. No console gamer shall be allowed among the crew, upon pain of death.
2. No crewmember shall PC game for money upon the ship, only for bragging rights.
3. Each crewmember shall keep their mouse and keyboard clean and fit for service.
4. To desert the ship while pwning console gamers shall be punished with death.
5. Quarrels about who is most 1337 at CS2 shall be ended on shore. Gabe Newell adjudicates.
6. Successful raids shall see the XP and looted booty shared equally among the crewmembers.
7. No person shall talk of giving up PC gaming until at least 170,000 console gamers have been defeated.
8. Any crew found to have cheated at online gaming shall be marooned with a Tamagotchi for company.
9. If any crewmember hears "Half-Life 3 confirmed" they are to ignore it, as it surely is a siren's call.
10. No person shall pull a Leeroy Jenkins while gaming upon pain of death.

...UNTIL **APRIL 25**

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